

**Socrates's State Gods and European Colonial God in Africa: Plato's  
*The Trial and Death of Socrates*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall  
Apart*, and Rwanda's King Musinga**

**Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure**

**with**

**Eva C. Kayitesi**

Piety “is the art of attending to the gods”—Socrates, “Euthyphro”  
“Let me simply say that piety is learning how to please the gods in word and deed, by prayers and sacrifices.”—Euthyphro, “Euthyphro”

In this essay, we compare Socrates's plight in Plato's *The Trial and Death of Socrates* to that of Umuofia people in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* and Rwanda's King Musinga in the 1930s. Thus, the essay broadens the idea of the gods of the state and

compares Socrates's predicament to that of King Yuhi Musinga of Rwanda—who believed in Rwandan traditional beliefs, which was undermining Belgium's "civilizing mission"—whom the Belgians dethroned on November 12, 1931 in Brussels for not being a Catholic and crowned his brother, who immediately converted to Catholicism (Rumiya 169); to Jesus in the Bible, whom the Romans accused of both sedition and calling himself the Son of God; and to characters in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a novel in which the missionaries discredit the gods of the people of Umuofia. Regarding Socrates, we argue that Meletus's charges against Socrates are not only vague, but the gods of the state in which Socrates lives are never identified. Nor are the new divinities that Socrates is alleged to have invented. In *Things Fall Apart*, the people of Umuofia are forced to convert to one God and are told that their gods and goddesses are not alive and therefore cannot do them any harm.

Although he is not part of this study, Simon Kimbangu can also be named here. Under Belgian colonial rule in the 1920s, Belgian colonial authorities imprisoned Kimbangu for founding a ministry that rivaled the Catholic and Protestant churches in the number of adherents. In September 1921, Kimbangu came out of hiding and turned himself in. Accusing him of creating a public disorder and opposing Belgian authorities, a military court found him guilty and sentenced him to death a month after he came out of hiding. Kimbangu spent thirty years in jail, where he died in 1951. Today, the Kimbanguist Church (The Church of Jesus Christ on Earth Through The Prophet Simon Kimbangu) continues to thrive in the Democratic Republic of Congo and around the world, including in Charlotte, North Carolina, in the United States.

At the end of "Euthyphro" section in *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, Socrates entreats Euthyphro to teach him more about the nature of piety and impiety so that he can use it to clear his name and get rid of Meletus's indictment. "Then I might have proven to him that I have been converted by Euthyphro, and had done rash innovations and speculations, in which I had indulged through ignorance, and was about to lead a better life" (16). In "Apologia," the next section, the seventy-year old Socrates confronts Meletus and his charges that Socrates has offended the gods of the state and corrupted the youth through his teaching. Following is how Socrates summarizes the charges,

And now I will try to defend myself against them: These new accusers must also have their affidavit read. What do they say? Something of this sort:—That Socrates is a doer of evil, and corruptor of the youth, and he does not believe in the gods of the state, and has other new divinities of his own. He [Meletus] says that I am a doer of evil, who corrupt the youth; but I say, O men of Athens, that Meletus is a doer of evil, and the evil is that he makes a joke of a serious matter, and is too ready at bringing other men to trial from a pretended zeal and interest about matters in which he really never had the smallest interest. (24-25)

When Meletus charges Socrates with disobeying the gods of the state and inventing new divinities, albeit he fails to provide clear evidence, Socrates challenges him to clearly prove or "in somewhat plainer terms" (27) clarify how he teaches young people to deny "the gods the state acknowledges, but some new divinities or spiritual agencies in their head" (27). Meletus

never offers any credible evidence, except to repeat the indictment and accuse Socrates of being an atheist.

According to allabouthistory.org, “the Greek gods were created by men to explain the world around them, act as a means of exploration, provide legitimacy and authority to ancient Greek aristocracy, and provide entertainment for the masses.” From this perspective, one can deduce that charging Socrates of atheism amounts to indicting him for undermining the legitimacy and authority of Athens, including hindering entertainment for the Athenians. Indeed, Socrates is concerned with philosophy as a means to seek truth and wisdom. Actually, there is enough evidence to suggest that Socrates believes in the gods of Athens, including Zeus. Discussing piety and impiety in “Euthyphro,” Socrates remarks that people “regard Zeus as the best and most righteous of the gods, although he fought with Cronos, his father, who devoured his sons and had himself punished Uranus, his own father (4). Moreover, he acknowledges that the temple of Athena, the patron goddess of Athens is full of quarrels among gods, also found in Acropolis and Panathenaea (5). Equally important, Socrates seems to agree with Euthyphro that piety “is the art of attending to the gods” and that being pious involves “learning how to please the gods in word and deed, by prayers and sacrifices” (14).

In “Apology,” Socrates makes a more compelling case that he is not a complete atheist when Meletus tells him and the court if “a man can believe in spiritual and divine agencies, and not in spirits or demigods” (28). When Meletus answers that no man can, Socrates skillfully demonstrates how Meletus’s charges are contradictory,

I am glad that I have extracted that answer, by the assistance of the court; nevertheless you swear in the indictment that I teach and believe in divine or spiritual agencies (new or old, no matter for that); at any rate, I believe in spiritual agencies, as you say and swear in the affidavit; but if I believe in divine beings, I must believe in spirits or demigods;—is not that true? Yes, that is true, for I may assume that your silence gives assent to that. Now what are spirits or demigods? are [sic] not either gods or the sons of gods? Is that true? (28)

In “Phaedo,” Socrates convincingly proves that he is not an atheist when he composes a hymn to honor Apollo, the Olympian god and son of Zeus, who is associated with music, poetry, and healing. He also composes a hymn to the god of festival, referring to Dionysus.

Meletus’s indictment against Socrates recalls other examples of biblical, historical, and fictional figures such as Jesus, King Yuhi Musinga of Rwanda during the Belgian colonial rule, and the people of Umuofia village in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. The four Gospels—Matt, Mark, Luke, and John—report the charges brought against Jesus, including subverting the power of the state by preventing people from paying taxes to Caesar and claiming to be God’s Son, which he does not deny.

In part one of *Things Fall Apart*, the longest part of the novel, Achebe goes to great length in documenting forms of the African sacred of the Igbo people of Nigeria. The sacred is found in proverbs, stories, drums and dances, masquerades, caves, and ancestral shrines. Not only do people pray to their gods and goddesses through their media, but they also directly pray

to their ancestors. As Unoka, Okonkwo's father, breaks the kola to share with Okoye who has come to collect his debt, he prays "to their ancestors for life and health, and for protection against the enemies'" (10). Just as Athens had its own deities, so did Umuofia village. We learn that other villages feared Umuofia, because Umuofia "was powerful in war and magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war-medicine was as old as the clan itself. Nobody knew how old. But on one point there was a general agreement--the active principle in that medicine had been an old woman with one leg. In fact, the medicine itself was called *agadinwayi*, or old woman. It has its shrine in the center of Umuofia, in a cleared spot" (15). Additionally, Umuofia had its own "Oracle--the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves'" whose consent Umuofia needed in order to go to war against another village. The case had to be clear and fair, thus providing a sense of fairness and justice (16).

By now, it should be clear that Umuofia's gods are both near the people and functional. People like Unoka could go to Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, to ask why his harvests were always poor. People also consulted the Oracle about their misfortunes, why they had a fight with their neighbors "or to discover what the future held for them or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers" (19). Regarding Unoka, the Priestess of Agbala informs him that he has "offended neither the gods nor [his] fathers," because "when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm," meaning that Unoka was not working hard enough (20). Noticeable is how people reach the Oracle's shrine,

The way into the shrine was a round hole at the side of a hill, just a little bigger than the round opening into a henhouse. Worshippers and those who came to seek knowledge from the god crawled their belly through the hole and found themselves in a dark, endless space in the presence of Agbala. No one had ever beheld Agbala, except his priestess. But no one had ever crawled into his awful shrine had come out without the fear of his power. His priestess stood by the sacred fire which she built in the heart of the cave and proclaimed the will of the god. The fire did not burn with a flame. The glowing logs only served to light up vaguely the dark figure of the priestess. (19-20)

While a woman is the priestess of Agbala, a man is the priest of Ani, the earth goddess. Just like the priestess of Agbala, the priest of Ani also intervenes in human affairs. When Okonkwo breaks the Week of Peace by heavily beating Ojiugo, one of his wives, he receives a visit from Ezeani, the priest of Ani. Not only does Ezeani refuse Okonkwo's kola, but he also rebukes him for having "committed a great evil" by insulting the "great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow" (32). Indeed, Okonkwo had overlooked the wisdom according to which one week before planting crops, one had to be nice to one's neighbors no matter what. Okonkwo offends Ani again at the end of the novel, when he commits suicide, "an offense against the Earth" after killing the white man's messenger (190). The close relationship of Ani to people in Umuofia is further demonstrated by the Feast of the New Yam, a festival designed to eat the last yams before harvesting the new yams as well as "to honor the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan" (37). The greatness of Ani hinges on several

functions she played in the lives of Umuofia people, not only by being “the earth goddess and the source of all fertility,” but also by playing “a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity [sic]. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth” (37).

Regarding festivals, there are interesting parallels between Umuofia and Athens. In “Phaedo” Cebes informs Socrates that the poet Evenus has asked him to find out if while in prison, Socrates has put Aesop in verse and composed a “hymn in honor of Apollo.” Socrates replies that he has had dreams that seemed to suggest he composes music. First, Socrates thought the dreams were encouraging him to study philosophy, but the more he thought about it and being under death sentence, he concluded that a festival would give him more respite. First, he “made” a hymn in honor of the god of the festival, and then considering that a poet, if he is really to be a poet or maker, should not only put words together but make stories, and as I have no invention, I took some fables of Aesop, which I had ready at hand and knew, and turned them into verse” (58).

The people of Umuofia experience a Socratic moment when European missionaries arrive in Umuofia. At first, Umuofia is so amused that it gives the Evil Forest to the missionaries to build their settlement, hoping that “the strange faith and the white man’s god would not last” (133). When the missionaries do not die the next morning, people without titles and those who have then been relegated to low status begin joining the new faith. But things change when Nwoye, Okonkwo’s son, joins the Christian Church. People who believe in a multitude of deities are told that there is only one God, the Creator of everybody and everything, who has sent the missionaries to preach in his name. Yet when Akunna informs Mr. Brown that that God is Chukwu who created the world and other gods, Mr. Brown responds that “Chukwu is the only God and others are false. You carve a piece of wood like that one (he pointed at the rafters from which Akunna’s carved *Ikenga* hung), ‘and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood” (164). Despite Mr. Brown’s efforts to understand “the religion of the clan” (166), like to Meletus to Socrates, the missionary informs the people of Umuofia that their gods “are not gods at all”, because they order them to kill people and “destroy innocent children” (135-36), and that they “are pieces of wood and stone,” and therefore cannot harm them (136). Interestingly, Socrates references some of the minor gods of Athens such as Proteus, a minor sea god and prophecy.

Although the circumstances for Achebe’s characters differ from Socrates’s case, it is clear that the outcome of the indictment depends upon those who are deciding which gods of the state matter. Just as Meletus does not seem to understand Socrates, the missionaries do not understand why the entire Umuofia is not embracing the new God. In fact, Okonkwo, who seems to represent the values of Umuofia village, albeit he has undermined them several times, asks his friend Obierika if the white man understands their language and culture. Obierika tells him that the white man does not understand their culture and that in fact, he has put a knife on things that hold them together and things have fallen apart. Moreover, Obierika reminds Okonkwo that it is too late to fight the white man, because some of their brothers have joined him. Killing them

would be an offense against Ani, the earth goddess. Okonkwo does not heed his friend's advice and, when a white man's messenger interrupts their meeting, he beheads him. Probably realizing what he has just done and not wanting to be judged by the colonial authorities and the missionaries, Okonkwo hangs himself. To some extent, this parallels what happens in "Phaedo," when Socrates decides to drink the poison instead of escaping from prison as suggested by his friend Crito. In a sense, one can argue that Socrates commits suicide by refusing the window open to him to escape from prison, even though he insists on serving the state sentence. Clearly, Socrates dies for a principle he has upheld all his life, a seeker of truth.

Regarding King Yuhi V Musinga, son Kigeli IV Rwabugiri, the Belgian colonial authorities accused him of hindering the "civilizing mission" by favoring the mediums of the priestess of Nyabingi, a deity, and by attempting to prevent his subjects from converting to Catholicism. The story of King Yuhi IV Musinga is much more complicated than Socrates's and Umuofia's insofar as Musinga dealt with three different European colonial powers: Germany, the Catholic Church, and Belgium. In fact, when Musinga was enthroned in 1897, he had no kingdom, as Rwanda was under German East Africa. After the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference, Rwanda was no longer an independent kingdom, albeit King Kigeli IV Rwabugiri did not know it. First, Musinga attempted to manipulate the Germans into strengthening his internal power while restricting the religious teaching to the Hutu and the Twa, which disappointed the White Fathers. As the oppressed joined the White Fathers, Musinga thought that he would play the Germans against the White Fathers, which, of course, could not work like that (Des Forges 29-32). In dealing with the White Fathers, Musinga tried to play a trickster, one time in 1904 "successfully divorcing himself from the anti-European stance of Kabare and Kanjogera," respectively his uncle and the Queen Mother (76), while in 1906 his "growing distrust of the Fathers drove him once more into accepting the guidance of Kanjogera, Kabare, and their nephew Rwidagembya" (77). The pattern was that each time Musinga had conflicts with the missionaries, he would ask the German Resident in Kigali to intervene, albeit at other times he would ask the missionaries to help him to mediate court confrontations. The strong alliance between Musinga and the Germans would cost the former the royal throne later when during World War II the Germans lost Rwanda to the Belgians--the League of Nations--But not before they coalesced to conquer the remaining regions that remained recalcitrant to both the kingdom of Rwanda and the German colonial authorities. Even with the Belgians, however, Musinga's relations with the latter was in an off-and-on pattern, with back-and-off accusations.

Just as Okonkwo and Umuofia become more worried when Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, and other notable men of titles join the new faith, so does King Yuhi IV Musinga become more worried when more and more Tutsi converted to Christianity. As Des Forges suggests, "The Court was especially sensitive to the possibility of "religious poisoning" in the schools because several important young Tutsi had recently converted to Christianity. At the beginning of the war, only a few hundred poor and weak Tutsi--those outside the court elite--had openly accepted Christianity (although several important young notables had secretly sought instruction from the Fathers" (Des Forges 163). Like Akukuwa in *Things Fall Apart* trying to explain his people's

beliefs to Mr. Brown, King Uyhi IV Musinga and the Queen Mother Kanjogera tried everything in attempting to curb the influence of Christianity, including kneeling before the Belgian Minister of Colonies in 1920 to “plead that they never be forced to convert” (164). Moreover, they argued that “Rwandan religious ideas were their heritage just as Christianity was the heritage of the Belgians. Regardless of what the missionaries preached, Christianity could never replace Rwandan beliefs as a foundation for the rule of the mwami [king]” (164).

Like Meletus, the Belgians first accused King Musinga of immorality (incest), “ambition, incompetence, and lack of responsibility”--our translation--(Rumiya 169). Nevertheless, the Belgians could not abolish the monarchy, because they realized that doing so would create disturbance and chaos in the colony, and that they needed it for the colonial administration. With the help of Bishop Classe, however, local colonial authorities mounted an international campaign against King Musinga. Bishop Classe not only accused King Musinga of having failed to foster institutional changes, but he also charged that King Musinga had cut ties with those who were pro-European and promised to retaliate against them once the Europeans left. Complicitous with certain chiefs, King Musinga had hired only those who were loyal to him, and he demanded donations even during the time of famine. Bishop Classe further accused King Musinga of pederasty and of preventing his relatives from converting to Catholicism. Additionally, King Musinga consulted sorcerers in order to deal with the relations between him and the colonial government to which he attributed his loss of power, which he hoped to recover by talking to the British. It should be noted that people whom Bishop Classe called sorcerers were actually *Abiru*, court ritualist poets who were in charge of court esoteric codes called *Ubwiru*, rituals that ranged from enthronement to how to deal with floods or droughts. Finally, King Musinga had ceased being a positive force for the colonial administration, because he had alienated himself from the Hutu and the Tutsi alike, and the high chiefs had run away from him (Rumiya 178). Convinced by Bishop Classe’s argument, Belgium sent its Governor of Ruanda-Urundi to dethrone King Musinga on November 12, 1930 (180).

In post-colonial studies, scholars such as Bill Ascroft argue for the importance of studying the sacred, especially how societies fight to recover their indigenous sacred even as they are forced to embrace the European sacred. Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thion;Go, Patricia Grace, Earl Lovelace, Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, Leslie Marmon Silko, Ray A. Young Bear, Beyoncé (with Yoruba and Igbo mythologies), and August Wilson, just to name a few, have consistently reclaimed their indigenous sacred, even if some of them might have opted for a syncretic sacred.

#### Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969. Print.

“Greek Gods.” <[http://www. Allabouthistory.org./](http://www.Allabouthistory.org/)>.

Des Forges, Alison Lieghafsky. *Defeats Is The Only Bad News: Rwanda Under Musinga, 1896-1931*. Ed. David Newbury. Madison, Wisconsin: University Press of Wisconsin, 2011. Print.

Plato. *The Trial and Death of Socrates: The Four Dialogues*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. Dover Publications. Print.

Rumiya, Jean. *Le Rwanda sous le régime du mandat Belge (1916-1931)*. Paris, France: Édition l’Harmattan, 1992. Print.