



WORLD LITERATURE II (ENG 252)

Things Fall Apart: Study Guide

Dr. Diane Thompson, NVCC, ELI

The British in Nigeria	Chinua Achebe	Igbo Names	The Story	Okonkwo's Offenses Against the Earth Goddess
Igbo Civilization	Bibliography			

THE BRITISH IN NIGERIA

Things Fall Apart tells the story of how British colonial culture, both church and government, destroyed the complex, ancient civilization of the Igbo people of Nigeria. Nigeria is in western Africa, in a heavily jungle-grown area that could not be systematically entered by Europeans until after the discovery of quinine in the mid-19th century. Before that, to travel in Nigeria meant death by Malaria for Europeans. However, once the British began to penetrate into Nigeria, their spread and control was rapid and extremely destructive of the native culture. *Things Fall Apart* takes place at the start of the twentieth century, when, according to Wren, "...British authorities, missions, and trade penetrated the Igbo hinterland east of the Niger River." (Wren in Lindfors, 38)

[Top](#)

CHINUA ACHEBE

Chinua Achebe was born in the town of Ogidi, Nigeria, on November 16, 1930. His father, Isiah Achebe, was a teacher for the Church Missionary Society. Chinua Achebe grew up in two cultures, that of the Igbo, and that of British Colonial Christianity. He went to Church schools where he studied and read widely in English, and then to University College, Ibadan. Chinua Achebe is one of the best known and most respected African writers working today (Norton 2092-3).

Things Fall Apart was Achebe's first novel. It became an immediate success, not only in Africa, but world-wide. This was partly due to its being written in English, which made it accessible outside of Nigeria, and mostly to its fascinating insider's view of what happens to an indigenous culture when invaded and controlled by a foreign power, in this case the British.

Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* in good part as a response to English-centered novels about the savage African jungle peoples, such as *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, and *Mister Johnson* by Joyce Carey, which use Africa as a metaphor for darkness of the soul and savagery. Achebe wanted to show, from an African point of view, just how civilized the African culture had been, and how the British colonial invaders had destroyed it. He succeeded brilliantly in doing this.

[Top](#)

IGBO NAMES TO REMEMBER

Although written in English, *Things Fall Apart* uses many Igbo terms, which can be confusing on the first reading, so let's look at a few of the more important Igbo words and names in the novel.

Umuofia	an Igbo village
Okonkwo	an important man in the village of Umuofia

Nwoye	Okonkwo's son
Ikemefuna	Okonkwo's foster son
Ekwefi	one of Okonkwo's wives
Ezinma	Ekwefi's daughter
Chielo	priestess of Agbala
Agbala	oracle of the Hills and Caves
Obierika	Okonkwo's friend; the voice of reason
Unoka	Okonkwo's n'er do well father
Egwugwu	masked ancestral spirits

You may want to make a list of characters' names and their roles while reading, and refer to it occasionally to help you remember who is who. I really didn't sort out all the names clearly in my own mind until my second reading of *Things Fall Apart*.

[Top](#)

THE STORY

Okonkwo was a prosperous leader in the Igbo village of Umuofia around the turn of the the twentieth century. His father, Unoka, had been a failure, lazy and irresponsible, but Okonkwo had worked very hard and become an important and respected man in his village.

Although he was prosperous and respected, Okonkwo was an angry man, whose:

whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness....It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. (all quotes from the Norton World Masterpieces, Vol. 2, cited below)

Consequently, he was hard, and even brutal at times to his own family, and equally hard on himself. He was quick to anger, and this quick anger ultimately led to his death.

Because of Okonkwo's hard-earned high standing in his village, he was given custody of Ikemefuna, a teenage boy who was handed over to the village of Umuofia as a sacrifice, by the neighboring village of Mbaino, to avoid a war over an Umuofian woman who had been killed in Mbaino. Ikemefuna quickly became a cherished part of Okonkwo's family, and a best friend and role model for Nwoye, Okonkwo's son.

Ikemefuna lived with Okonkwo's family for three years until the Oracle of the Hills and Caves announced that the time had come to actually sacrifice the boy. The oldest man in the village warned Okonkwo not to participate in the sacrificial killing: "That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death." But Okonkwo went along with the sacrificial party, despite the warning. When Ikemefuna realized what was happening and ran to Okonkwo for help, crying "My father, they have killed me!" Okonkwo..."Dazed with fear...drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak."

Okonkwo's fear of his own weakness had led him to offend the Earth Goddess, as Obierika, Okonkwo's good friend, and the main voice of reason in the story, points out:

"If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families....if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it."

Ikemefuna's death also permanently alienated Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, who later became one of the early converts to Christianity, rejecting Okonkwo's traditional tribal values entirely.

Between this misguided killing and the final disaster, we see the stable elements of Igbo civilization, including the New Yam Festival, a wedding, and the story of Ekwefi, her daughter Ezinma, and how Chielo, the priestess of Agbala carried Ezinma around the villages one strange night.

Okonkwo's gun exploded during a funeral dance and killed a son of the dead man--this was a crime against the earth goddess,

a "female crime" because unintended. Okonkwo had to flee to his mother's kin for seven years of exile.

Once he was in exile, Okonkwo found that

....everything had been broken. He had been cast out of his clan....Clearly his personal god, or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true--that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation."

This meditation on *chi* indicates that Okonkwo has reached the limits of his ability to influence his own destiny. *Chi* is the active, spiritual force that a man possesses. It is his personal deity, but difficult to define or explain beyond that. The problem for Okonkwo is that despite his desperate desire to succeed, his *chi* or fate will not let him go any further. From here on, he is headed toward failure, destruction and death.

Obierika visits Okonkwo in exile and tells the story of Abame--the encounter with the white man on a bicycle. This story is ironic because the oracle said "the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them." So the clan killed him and they were destroyed anyway. This incident reminds me of *Oedipus Rex*, who is told that he will kill his father and marry his mother, and although he spends his entire life trying to avoid doing these terrible things, they are his fate and he does them anyway.

At any rate, the massacre at Abame was based on an actual historic incident, where villagers killed a white man on a bicycle. This one murder was punished by the British with the massacre of several towns full of people to avenge his death. Events such as this made the Africans understandably terrified of defying the British colonial power.

While Okonkwo was in exile, village life in Umuofia changed rapidly and beyond repair. Obierika visited Okonkwo again, because the Christian missionaries had come to Umuofia. Worse, Nwoye had joined the missionaries and said of Okonkwo, "He is not my father...." And for his part, Okonkwo did not even wish to speak about Nwoye. The father and son were permanently and totally estranged from one another. This utter rejection of kin was perhaps the most destructive effect of Christianity on the tribal values of the Igbo people.

Nwoye was drawn to Christianity by his unhappiness at his father's anger, by his outrage over the sacrifice of Ikemefuna and his father's role in that murder, and also by:

....the poetry of the new religion....The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul--the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed.

Achebe is careful to present both the positive and the negative aspects of Christianity and its impact on the Igbo. Nwoye has good reasons for becoming a Christian, and Christianity provides him with the support and reassurance he needs in order to live.

When the seven years have passed, Okonkwo hosts a feast before returning home from exile. A village elder gives a speech expressing his fears for the younger generation:

"...I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors....I fear for you; I fear for the clan."

The life of the clan had always been rooted in traditional close ties among related people; Christianity now allowed disaffected individuals to break those ties with their families and clan and join the Church instead. The early members of the Church included the outcasts and dregs of the clan, not respected leaders in good standing. However, this was a source of the Church's great appeal for those outcasts -- rejected by the clan, they were welcomed by the Church. Obierika pointed out that once these outcasts of the clan joined the Church, which separated them from the clan:

"....our clan can no longer act like one. [The white man] has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."

The British brought the Church; they also brought a government that intended to control the clans through trickery, force and manipulation of the Igbo's desire for the money they could earn for selling palm oil to the British and the manufactured goods they could buy with this money.

When Okonkwo returned to his native village:

The clan had undergone such profound change during his exile that it was barely recognizable. The new religion and government and the trading stores were very much in the people's eyes and minds. There were still many who saw these new institutions as evil, but even they talked and thought about little else, and certainly not about Okonkwo's return.

.....
Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart....

The incident which spelled the beginning of the end was when Enoch, the son of the snake priest, attacked and unmasked an *egwugwu*, a masked ancestral spirit, who had hit Enoch with a cane.

Enoch had killed an ancestral spirit, and Umuofia was thrown into confusion.

.....
That night the Mother of the Spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night....It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming--its own death.

The next day the *egwugwu*, the masked ancestral spirits who acted as judges for the clan, assembled in the marketplace and headed for Enoch's compound, which they trashed and burned. Then they headed for the church, which they also burned.

Not about to tolerate such seditious behavior, the District Commissioner tricked the Umuofian village leaders into coming to his headquarters, where he arrested them. A fine was paid by the village and the leaders, including Okonkwo, were released after a few days, but they felt utterly humiliated by the ordeal, and Okonkwo swore vengeance, whether or not the clan decided to go to war against the white men.

The village leaders met and the first man spoke, urging the Igbo to go to war against the British:

"All our gods are weeping....Our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes....Are all the sons of Umuofia with us here?....
"They are not....They have broken the clan and gone their several ways. We who are here this morning have remained true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland. If we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamed of such a thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them. So we must do what our fathers would never have done."

As he spoke, five court messengers approached. The court messengers, or *kotma*, were Africans who worked for the British Colonial government, and were even more hateful, if possible, than the British themselves. Okonkwo:

sprang to his feet....He confronted the head messenger, trembling with hate, unable to utter a word....

The spell was broken by the head messenger. "Let me pass!" he ordered.

"What do you want here?"

"The white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop."

In a flash Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's machete descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body.

The clan let the other messengers escape, and Okonkwo knew by this that they would not go to war against the white man.

Okonkwo then hanged himself, which was an abomination against the Earth Goddess. When the District Commissioner arrived at his compound, seeking Okonkwo, Obierika showed him the body and asked for help taking it down and burying it, because the clan could not handle the body of a suicide.

The last line of the story belongs to the District Commissioner who decides to give a paragraph to Okonkwo in his book, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. This is Achebe's bitterly ironic comment on the insensitivity of the British to the Igbo culture which they were so rapidly and profitably destroying.

[Top](#)

OKONKWO'S 3 OFFENSES AGAINST THE EARTH GODDESS

1	Okonkwo participated in killing Ikemefuna
2	Okonkwo intentionally beat one of his wives during the Week of Peace
3	Okonkwo hanged himself

Okonkwo's offenses against the Earth Goddess were related to his destruction, as was his *chi*, which did not allow as much

success as he struggled for. Okonkwo also was an angry man, quick to violence, willing to work very hard but disinclined to control his anger. All of these factors worked together to provoke him into killing the *kotma*, and having done so, he had no recourse but to die; he had acted rashly, without the support of his clan. His clan was not about to go to war against the British and could not protect Okonkwo from them; indeed Okonkwo's action could easily have provoked a British massacre of the Igbo such as the one at Abame over the death of the bicycle rider. Having killed the *kotma*, Okonkwo could no longer live among the Igbo, and there was no other way he could live at all.

[Top](#)

IGBO CIVILIZATION

Achebe's purpose in telling the stories of festivals and weddings, the relationship of Ekwefi and her sickly, beloved daughter Ezinma, and her wild night with Chielo, the Priestess of Agbala is to make us realize just how full and complex was the life of the Igbo villages before contact with the British, and how much was lost by the falling apart of that village civilization.

But Achebe is even-handed in his stories of traditional Igbo life, and he includes troubling elements, such as the throwing away of twin infants into the evil forest, the sacrifice of Ikemefuna to atone for a murder he did not commit, and the story of Okonkwo's exile for a murder committed not by him, but by his gun that exploded during a funeral, killing one of the sons of the dead man. In short, Christianity was able to gain a foothold among the Igbo precisely because there were already problems within the traditional culture. Christianity made especial inroads among alienated and unhappy people, such as Nwoye, Okonkwo's son.

[Top](#)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Lindfors, Bernth, ed. *Approaches to Teaching Achebe's Things Fall Apart*. New York: The Modern Language Assn. of America, 1991.

Mack, Maynard, Gen. Ed. *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*. Sixth Edition. Volume 2. New York: W. W. Norton, 1992.

Wren, Robert M. *Achebe's World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980.

[Top](#)

© Diane Thompson: 2/27/1999; last updated: March 30, 2012