

*Disclaimer: This is a machine generated PDF of selected content from our databases. This functionality is provided solely for your convenience and is in no way intended to replace original scanned PDF. Neither Cengage Learning nor its licensors make any representations or warranties with respect to the machine generated PDF. The PDF is automatically generated "AS IS" and "AS AVAILABLE" and are not retained in our systems. CENGAGE LEARNING AND ITS LICENSORS SPECIFICALLY DISCLAIM ANY AND ALL EXPRESS OR IMPLIED WARRANTIES, INCLUDING WITHOUT LIMITATION, ANY WARRANTIES FOR AVAILABILITY, ACCURACY, TIMELINESS, COMPLETENESS, NON-INFRINGEMENT, MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE. Your use of the machine generated PDF is subject to all use restrictions contained in The Cengage Learning Subscription and License Agreement and/or the Gale Literature Resource Center Terms and Conditions and by using the machine generated PDF functionality you agree to forgo any and all claims against Cengage Learning or its licensors for your use of the machine generated PDF functionality and any output derived therefrom.*

## Overview: *Things Fall Apart*

**Date:** 1997

**From:** Literature and Its Times: Profiles of 300 Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events that Influenced Them (Vol. 2: *Civil Wars to Frontier Societies (1800-1880s)*. )

**Publisher:** Gale

**Document Type:** Work overview

**Length:** 3,942 words

About this Work

**Title:** Things Fall Apart (Novel)

**Published:** January 01, 1958

**Genre:** Novel

**Author:** Achebe, Chinua

**Occupation:** Nigerian writer

**Other Names Used:** Achebe, Albert Chinualumogu;

Full Text:

Chinua Achebe was born in 1930 in eastern Nigeria, the son of devout Christian parents. He was baptized Albert Chinualumogu, but dropped this Victorian name when he began his studies. At the university in Nigeria, his frustrations with some of the narrow or distorted portrayals of Africa in European novels (specifically Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*) motivated him to write *Things Fall Apart*. Also motivating Achebe was a personal reality. After World War II, many Nigerians sought a reconciliation with their past, which they had abandoned for Christianity and the industrialization brought by Europeans to the British colonies in West Africa. Although Achebe had spoken Igbo, not English, as a child, he and his family celebrated Christian, not Igbo, festivals. His writing of *Things Fall Apart* when he reached manhood was Achebe's act of atonement with [his] past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son (Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 123).

### Events in History at the Time the Novel Takes Place

#### *Structure of a Nineteenth-Century Igbo Community*

Until the late nineteenth century, the Igbo dwelled in small independent villages linked to one another by trade but not by politics. Living in sedentary agricultural communities, they relied from year to year on the success of their harvest. Yams were the staple crop of the Igbo diet. To facilitate trade among the villages, the Igbo used small seashells called cowries as a unit of currency.

The Igbo believed in a hierarchy of gods, ranging from Chukwu, the all-powerful, to the *chi*, an individual's personal god. A malevolent *chi* would thwart a man's ambitions, whereas a kind one would ensure success. But the Igbo did not believe that a man's fate was entirely determined by his *chi*. When a man says yes, they declared, his *chi* says yes also (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 28). In other words, a man's will and his *chi* work together. The saying resembles the Christian adage that the Lord helps those who help themselves. The Igbo believed also in the importance of their ancestors. Failure to preserve traditions might anger the spirits of their forefathers.

Within the independent villages, political organization was based on ancestry. The smallest unit, the nuclear family, was under the rule of the husband, who often lived in a hut separate from his wife or wives and their children. The extended family of relatives on the husband's side was ruled by the oldest surviving man because it was believed he could communicate with revered ancestors.

An assembly of adult men debated concerns that affected the entire village, such as a decision to go to war. A man won influence in these assemblies by acquiring titles, which could be purchased from a council of titled elders with yams. This system of purchasing titles served as a method of rewarding hard work and encouraged the spread of wealth.

Secret societies, such as the masked *egwugwu* in Achebe's fictional village (Umuofia), helped enforce unwritten codes of conduct. Crimes included the slaying of a clansman, whether accidentally or intentionally; theft; assault; slander; and disrespect for the gods. Members of the secret societies would disguise themselves as the spirits of ancestors. They denounced offenders and arbitrated disputes; their anonymity and their supernatural air lent them a sense of authority. In Achebe's novel, a convert to Christianity unmasks an *egwugwu*, an unpardonable offense. In doing so, the convert threatens the survival of a revered tribal tradition.

The arrival of European missionaries and traders in West Africa in the mid-eighteenth century radically changed Igbo life. The

missionaries challenged traditional laws and persuaded some of the Igbo to convert to Christianity. There was also a new unity among the independent villages as confrontations with colonial authority motivated them to cooperate against a common threat. At the same time, by tampering with the traditional religion, the missionaries had broken a bond that united the Igbo. In the novel, Okonkwo's perceptive friend, Obierika, says

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.

*(Things Fall Apart, p. 162)*

*The Slave Trade and the Christian Missionaries*

At the end of the eighteenth century, the slave trade off the coast of Africa had been active for more than three hundred years. At this time, a humanitarian outcry against slavery arose in Great Britain and reached its Parliament. The legislative body responded in 1807 by passing the Abolition Act, which made the trade in African slaves illegal for British subjects. A British navy detachment was deployed off the coast of West Africa to intercept slave ships, but this effort proved costly and not entirely effective. There was another, less direct method, suggested Thomas Buxton, the leader of the British antislavery movement: let the freed slaves in England who had been converted to Christianity return to Africa as missionaries and encourage other blacks to end their participation in the barbarous slave trade.

White missionaries of the era regarded the conversion and salvation of distant peoples such as the Igbo the duty of a Christian. The missionaries who arrived in Africa in the nineteenth century intended to atone for the horrors of slavery, to which in the past whites had so grievously contributed, by educating and Christianizing the African. The assumption was that European Christianity would heal the wounds that had been inflicted by white European as well as other slave traders. But because of their ignorance and intolerance of African customs, the missionaries often only deepened old scars.

African natives were frequently apprehensive about the missionaries and, although they sent their children to missionary schools, they restricted what the missionaries could teach. Parents were aware of the benefits of education and wanted their children to be competitive applicants for the jobs in emerging fields like civil service, which required proficiency in spoken and written English. They did not, however, desire or expect any moral or religious teaching, contending that the proverbs and fables of tribal history imparted the morals of their own native religion. European education was supposed to provide a supplement to tribal teachings, not a substitute for them.

The missionaries, however, sprinkled the lessons with Christian morals and proverbs. An essay on Igbo farm work, for example, concluded with the statement "When God created the first man, the occupation he bequeathed to him was farming, as we learn from the Bible" (Emenyonu, p. 26). An essay about trading began with "trading is a good occupation when embarked upon with the fear of God and honesty," and ended with "To cheat your customer is bad. One who fears God should desist from such. Jesus Christ urges you to do unto others as you would that they do unto you" (Emenyonu, p. 26). The trusting children were learning Christianity just as they would have with more formal instruction.

In other areas, however, the missionaries easily won the favor of Igbo villagers who had suffered from precolonial practices. Lepers, for example, who lived as outcasts and were not given proper burial, embraced Christianity as an alternative to Igbo religion. Having endured persecution under tribal law, such outcasts antagonized the more traditional Igbo, denouncing their rituals, art, music, and clothing.

When violence erupted, British soldiers came to enforce British laws. They interceded in disputes between villagers, practically replacing tribal authority. The Igbo often had to rely on interpreters who themselves were African Christian converts disdainful of traditional customs. They suffered the treachery of unscrupulous officials like the district commissioner in the novel, who invites the leaders of Umuofia to his office in seeming friendship but then arrests them. In 1900 a British major warned, "The practice of calling chiefs to meetings and then seizing them and of calling in guns to mark and then destroy them has resulted in a general distrust of the government and its policy" (Wren, p. 29). Government corruption clashed with the maxims of pious missionaries and spread suspicion of Europeans among natives, intensifying already existing conflicts.

Resistance to European authority resulted in what was called "collective punishment." Rather than identify and punish guilty individuals, British "peacemakers" slaughtered whole villages. The Collective Punishment Ordinance of 1912, as noted in the records, "legalize[d] [in the West] what in practice has always been done in the Central and Eastern provinces" (Wren, p. 28). Archives record an uprising in 1915 during which outraged clan members destroyed a church near Enugu, a village not far from where Achebe's father was working. The British retaliation killed more than forty natives to compensate for one dead and one wounded British soldier. Although the alleged intent was "pacification," colonialism, in fact, caused more violence than it prevented.

## **The Novel in Focus**

### *The Plot*

Okonkwo, the child of an idle man who bequeathed his son nothing but debts and a poor reputation, struggles to rise above his father's disgrace and become a man of wealth and influence. He wins respect through his prowess in physical combat, both in wrestling and at war, and works to amass barns full of yams, a sign of wealth.

When a woman from Umuofia is killed by a man in the neighboring village of Mbaino, the tribe demands recompense or threatens war. To avert bloodshed, the people of Mbaino offer a young virgin and the son of the killer to the people of Umuofia. The virgin is

given to the husband of the slain woman to replace his wife, and the boy to the clan as a whole to replace the lost life. As a leader in his village, Okonkwo is asked to take the boy, Ikemefuma, into his household.

Ikemefuma slowly forgets his previous life and becomes a part of Okonkwo's family, even calling Okonkwo father. The friendship that develops between Ikemefuma and Okonkwo's timid son, Nwoye, emboldens Nwoye and delights Okonkwo. But their happiness is shattered when, after three years, the implacable village oracle demands Ikemefuma's death in retribution for the earlier murder, now that the boy has grown up and can pay the penalty. A clan leader comes to Okonkwo's house and warns, That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death (Things Fall Apart, p. 55).

Okonkwo, too eager to prove that he is not like his poorly-thought-of father, ignores his friend's advice to stay at home and accompanies the party leading Ikemefuma to his death in the forest. As a man raises his blade to slay the boy, Okonkwo turns away. But when Ikemefuma cries out My father, they have killed me! (Things Fall Apart, p. 59), Okonkwo draws his machete and finishes off the killing by slicing the boy in half. Okonkwo does this because he was afraid of being thought weak (Things Fall Apart, p. 59).

Obierika, a friend of Okonkwo, announces his daughter's engagement, helping to lift Okonkwo out of his depression. But his first peaceful sleep since Ikemefuma's death is disturbed by one of his wives, Ekwefi, whose only child, a daughter named Ezinma, has fallen ill. Ekwefi had borne ten children, nine of whom had died in infancy. She had seen the bodies of her ogbanje infants mutilated and thrown into the forest. She expressed her despair in names that she chose for her children, such as Onwumbiko (Death, I implore you), Ozoemena (May it not happen again), and Onwuman (Death may please himself) (Things Fall Apart, p. 74). Although sickly, her tenth child, Ezinma, has survived, but the slightest sign of illness upsets Ekwefi. Fortunately, the girl withstands the sickness, and the trial revives Okonkwo, reminding him of his love for his daughter, whom he often insists should have been a boy. His happiness is, however, short-lived.

A village leader dies and during the funeral rites Okonkwo's gun discharges and kills the dead man's youngest son. Although the death was an accident, Okonkwo is forced into exile for seven years. A crowd of men destroy his house and barns and kill his animals. Although they bear Okonkwo no ill will, they feel they must cleanse the land of his sin.

Okonkwo has fled with his family to the village where his mother was born, Mbanta; its people have welcomed him. During the second year of Okonkwo's exile, his friend Obierika brings him news of the village Abame, which was decimated. A white man riding what Obierika describes as an iron horse had ventured near the village. The villagers had approached him, but found him incomprehensible. The village oracle warned that the white man would destroy their clan, so they killed him. Soon after, on a market day, white men surrounded the villagers and shot into the crowd. Obierika concludes that the men of Abame were foolish to kill a stranger, but warns I am greatly afraid. We have heard stories about 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 (Things Fall Apart, p. 130).

By the time Obierika returns to visit Okonkwo two years later, white missionaries have established a church and won converts back in Umuofia. The converts are the outcasts from the clan, and no one considers the crazy new faith of Christianity a serious threat. Obierika is distressed, however, by the bond that has developed between the missionaries and Okonkwo's son, Nwoye. Nwoye had left his father after a violent encounter and returned to Umuofia. Now Obierika reports that Nwoye has been moved by the Christians' rhetoric, particularly their insistence that the Igbo gods were gods of deceit who tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children (Things Fall Apart, p. 136).

As Okonkwo's seventh year of exile comes to an end, he eagerly looks forward to his return home. Arriving in Umuofia, he discovers to his amazement that the Christians have flourished and recruited more converts, even men who were influential in the clan. More importantly, the white men have built a district court and now arbitrate village disputes. Okonkwo is outraged, but few seem to share his anger.

Mr. Brown, a white missionary, had befriended members of the clan, who even presented him with a carved elephant tusk as a sign of dignity. His attempts to explain the differences between Christianity and the native religion were sometimes futile, but his willingness to discuss Igbo traditions won him the villagers' respect.

Mr. Brown's health deteriorated, though, and he was succeeded by the Reverend James Smith, a different breed of preacher. Smith's intolerance of local customs encourage the more fervent converts to provoke the tribe. During an annual ceremony, one convert boldly unmask one of the costumed men portraying the ancestral spirits, a deliberate attempt to reveal the identity of the person beneath the mask. In retaliation the tribesmen burn the church.

Pleased that his tribe has acted to drive the Christians from their village, Okonkwo agrees to accompany the other village leaders summoned before the district commissioner. They are cautious and take their machetes, but in the commissioner's office they are nevertheless caught unaware and handcuffed. The commissioner demands a fine of two hundred bags of cowries and leaves the men alone with guards, who taunt and abuse them. Rather than await their decision, the commissioner sends messengers to Umuofia to extort the money from the villagers. The villagers quickly gather the two hundred and fifty bags of cowries, fifty of which the messengers have added on for themselves, and the leaders are released.

The village convenes to discuss the threat of the white men, but their meeting is interrupted by messengers who insist the people disperse. Okonkwo draws his machete and slays one of the messengers, expecting the crowd to cheer and join him. But when he turns, he sees nothing but a fearful tumult. He leaves the people, returns to his compound, and hangs himself. When the district commissioner arrives, Obierika must ask him to attend to the burial of Okonkwo. It is an abomination for a man to take his own life, and such a man cannot be buried by his clan. The district commissioner orders a messenger to take down the body, and then ponders how the story of this man's suicide will make a reasonable paragraph in his memoirs.

## Colonial Justice

In the novel, when a woman of Umuofia flees her brutal husband, the man calls on her family to pay him some recompense. The *egwugwu*, or assembly of clan members dressed as spirits, convene to hear his arguments. Responding to his wife's charge that her husband beat her, the *egwugwu* order that the man beg his wife for forgiveness and that he offer her family gifts to atone for his crime.

The entire proceeding demonstrates that the people of Umuofia were neither lawless nor ungoverned before the arrival of the European colonists. Although the colonial authorities contended that they were bringing justice to unruly savages, they often only spread corruption. In the novel, they intercede in a dispute concerning land and award the area in question to the family which ha[d] given much money to the white man's messengers and interpreter (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 162). Okonkwo is incredulous, and asks his friend Obierika, Does the white man understand our custom about land? Obierika replies, How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 162).

## Sources

Achebe's frustration with European novels about Africa motivated him to write *Things Fall Apart*. He was particularly bothered by the works of Joyce Cary, a British novelist who had lived in Nigeria for six years. Cary believed that life in a primitive tribe is monotonous and boring. It survives, when it does survive, only because people who suffer it have no idea of anything better (Cary in Killam, p. 131). He claimed his novels set in Africa were meant to show certain men and their problems in the tragic background of a continent still little advanced from the Stone Age (Cary in Killam, p. 124). Achebe described these novels as a most superficial picture of not only of the country but even of the Nigerian character. He then concluded that perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside (Achebe in Okoye, p. 10).

Although the use of detail in *Things Fall Apart* would suggest a thorough knowledge of the Igbo traditions and culture, Achebe conceded,

it was all sort of picked up here and there. There was no research in the library [because] there wasn't really anything to read. The Ibos are perhaps the least studied of all major tribes in Africa.

(Achebe in Okoye, p. 160)

Although Achebe's parents were Christian, they were by no means intolerant or critical of the traditional religion. Their explanations helped Achebe create an authentic picture of the Igbo past. Achebe's grandfather had been a leader in the village and indeed had welcomed some of the first Christian missionaries. Among these missionaries was G. T. Basden, an inquisitive pioneer whom the village honored with an ivory tusk. He became Achebe's father's teacher and friend and wrote extensively of his experiences. Although Achebe denies he consciously modeled any character on Basden, he admits it seems likely that the legend of Basden must have informed my conception of Brown (Achebe in Okoye, p. 18).

## Events in History at the Time the Novel Was Written

### Nigerian Politics

Up until the World War II, the British made few concessions to Nigerians' petitions for self-rule. During the war Britain's prime minister, Winston Churchill, promised to respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live (Ezera, p. 39). Having pledged to fight for self-rule in Nazi-occupied Europe, Churchill could not continue to ignore the demand for independence in Nigeria.

The Richards Constitution of 1946 was the first attempt to superimpose federalism on the diverse peoples of Nigeria. The three regions (northern, southern and western) were brought under the administration of one legislative council composed of twenty-eight Nigerians and seventeen British officers. Regional councils, however, guaranteed some independence from the national council and forged a link between local authorities, such as tribal chiefs, and the national government.

There were three major tribes (the Hausa, the Yoruba and the Igbo) and more than eight smaller ones living in Nigeria. This diversity complicated the creation of a unified Nigeria. Between 1946 and 1960 the country went through several different constitutions, each one attempting to balance power between the regional and the national bodies of government.

On October 1, 1960, Nigeria attained full status as a sovereign state and a member of the British Commonwealth. But under the Constitution of 1960 the Queen of England was still the head of state. She remained the commander-in-chief of Nigeria's armed forces, and the Nigerian navy operated as part of Britain's Royal Navy. Nigerians felt frustrated by the implication that they were the subjects of a monarch living over four thousand miles away. In 1963, five years after the publication of Achebe's novel, a new constitution would replace the British monarch with a Nigerian president as head of state in Nigeria.

### Neglected Traditions

In 1958, while Nigerians were striving toward political freedom, Achebe was looking back to the traditions almost extinguished by colonialism. Colonialism had sometimes fostered a sense of inferiority among Africans that made them suspicious or even disdainful of their past. Achebe wrote:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.

(Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 72)

Achebe's decision to write in English was by no means an estrangement from his ethnic roots. Rather, it was a guarantee that his novels would be accessible to almost all of the many peoples of Nigeria, who speak several different languages. Achebe pointed out the only reason why we can even talk about African unity is that when we get together we can have a manageable number of languages to talk in English, French, Arabic (Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 95). English, he believed, could be a valuable tool in forging Nigerian unity.

### Reception

Some critics felt that Achebe's novel unjustly faulted colonialists. Africans, they alleged, should be grateful for the introduction of western culture and technology. Soon after the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, Honor Tracy, a British critic, in an article entitled "Three Cheers for Mere Anarchy!" wrote:

These bright Negro barristers who talk so glibly about African culture, how would they like to return to wearing raffia skirts? How would novelist Achebe like to go back to the mindless times of his grandfather instead of holding the modern job he has in broadcasting in Lagos?

(Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 5)

On the other hand, *Things Fall Apart* won praise as a vivid account of tribal beliefs and culture (Allen, p. 814). Critics commended Achebe's ability to include Igbo proverbs in a novel in English and to preserve in his narrative the neglected customs of an almost forgotten past. They stressed his talents not just as a historian, but as a novelist whose portrayal of a proud man's fall invites comparison with Greek tragedies.

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

- Achebe, Chinua. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975.
- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1959.
- Allen, Walter. "New Novels." *New Statesman* 55 (June 21, 1958): 814-15.
- Emenyonu, Ernest. *The Rise of the Igbo Novel*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Ezera, Kalu. *Constitutional Developments in Nigeria*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1960.
- Killam, G. D. *Africa in English Fiction*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1968.
- Okoye, Emmanuel Meziemadu. *The Traditional Religion and its Encounter with Christianity in Achebe's Novels*. Bern: Peter Lang, 1987.
- Wren, Robert. *Achebe's World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels*. Washington: Three Continents Press, 1980.

**Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 1997 Joyce Moss and George Wilson, COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale

**Source Citation** (MLA 8th Edition)

Moss, Joyce, and George Wilson. "Overview: *Things Fall Apart*." *Literature and Its Times: Profiles of 300 Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events that Influenced Them*, vol. 2: Civil Wars to Frontier Societies (1800-1880s), Gale, 1997. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1430002902/LitRC?u=fairfax\\_main&sid=LitRC&xid=7e94dcb5](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1430002902/LitRC?u=fairfax_main&sid=LitRC&xid=7e94dcb5). Accessed 5 July 2020.

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|H1430002902