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On **Achebe's**

Things Fall Apart

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Things Fall Apart

By John Chua and Suzanne Pavlos, M.Ed., C.S.W.

IN THIS BOOK

- Learn about the Life and Background of the Author
- Preview an Introduction to the Novel
- Explore themes, character development, and recurring images in the Critical Commentaries
- Examine in-depth Character Analyses
- Acquire an understanding of the novel with Critical Essays
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Publisher's Acknowledgments

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Project Editor: Linda Brandon
Acquisitions Editor: Greg Tubach
Copy Editor: Mary Fales
Glossary Editors: The editors and staff at Webster's New World™ Dictionaries
Editorial Administrator: Michelle Hacker
Editorial Assistant: Jennifer Young

Composition

Indexer: York Production Services, Inc.
Proofreader: York Production Services, Inc.
Wiley Indianapolis Composition Services

CliffsNotes™ *Things Fall Apart*

Published by:

Wiley Publishing, Inc.

111 River Street

Hoboken, NJ 07030

www.wiley.com

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Library of Congress Control Number: 00-107791

ISBN: 978-0-7645-8647-7

Printed in the United States of America

15 14 13 12 11 10

10/QY/QR/QR/IN

Published by Wiley Publishing, Inc., Hoboken, NJ

Published simultaneously in Canada

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How to Use This Book

This CliffsNotes study guide on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* supplements the original literary work, giving you background information about the author, an introduction to the work, a graphical character map, critical commentaries, expanded glossaries, and a comprehensive index, all for you to use as an educational tool that will allow you to better understand *Things Fall Apart*. This study guide was written with the assumption that you have read *Things Fall Apart*. Reading a literary work doesn't mean that you immediately grasp the major themes and devices used by the author; this study guide will help supplement your reading to be sure you get all you can from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. CliffsNotes Review tests your comprehension of the original text and reinforces learning with questions and answers, practice projects, and more. For further information on Chinua Achebe and *Things Fall Apart*, check out the CliffsNotes Resource Center.

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LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR

The following abbreviated biography of Chinua Achebe is provided so that you might become more familiar with his life and the historical times that possibly influenced his writing. Read this Life and Background of the Author section and recall it when reading Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, thinking of any thematic relationship between Achebe's work and his life.

Personal Background2

Personal Background

Chinua Achebe (pronounced *Chee-noo-ah Ah-chay-bay*) is considered by many critics and teachers to be the most influential African writer of his generation. His writings, including the novel *Things Fall Apart*, have introduced readers throughout the world to creative uses of language and form, as well as to factual inside accounts of modern African life and history. Not only through his literary contributions but also through his championing of bold objectives for Nigeria and Africa, Achebe has helped reshape the perception of African history, culture, and place in world affairs.

The first novel of Achebe's, *Things Fall Apart*, is recognized as a literary classic and is taught and read everywhere in the English-speaking world. The novel has been translated into at least forty-five languages and has sold several million copies. A year after publication, the book won the Margaret Wong Memorial Prize, a major literary award.

Achebe was born in the Igbo (formerly spelled *Ibo*) town of Ogidi in eastern Nigeria on November 16, 1930, the fifth child of Isaiah Okafor Achebe and Janet Iloegbunam Achebe. His father was an instructor in Christian catechism for the Church Missionary Society. Nigeria was a British colony during Achebe's early years, and educated English-speaking families like the Achebes occupied a privileged position in the Nigerian power structure. His parents even named him Albert, after Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria of Great Britain. (Achebe himself chose his Igbo name when he was in college.)

Education

Achebe attended the Church Missionary Society's school where the primary language of instruction for the first two years was Igbo. At about eight, he began learning English. His relatively late introduction to English allowed Achebe to develop a sense of cultural pride and an appreciation of his native tongue—values that may not have been cultivated had he been raised and taught exclusively in English. Achebe's home fostered his understanding of both cultures: He read books in English in his father's library, and he spent hours listening to his mother and sister tell traditional Igbo stories.

At fourteen, Achebe was selected to attend the Government College in Umuahia, the equivalent of a university preparatory school and

considered the best in West Africa. Achebe excelled at his studies, and after graduating at eighteen, he was accepted to study medicine at the new University College at Ibadan, a member college of London University at the time. The demand for educated Nigerians in the government was heightened because Nigeria was preparing for self-rule and independence. Only with a college degree was a Nigerian likely to enter the higher ranks of the civil service.

The growing nationalism in Nigeria was not lost on Achebe. At the university, he dropped his English name “Albert” in favor of the Igbo name “Chinua,” short for Chinualumogo. Just as Igbo names in *Things Fall Apart* have literal meanings, Chinualumogo is translated as “My spirit come fight for me.”

At University College, Achebe switched his studies to liberal arts, including history, religion, and English. His first published stories appeared in the student publication the *University Herald*. These stories have been reprinted in the collection *Girls at War and Other Stories*, which was published in 1972. Of his student writings, only a few are significantly relative to his more mature works; short stories such as “Marriage is a Private Affair” and “Dead Man’s Path” explore the conflicts that arise when Western culture meets African society.

Career Highlights

After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1953, Achebe joined the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation as a producer of radio talks. In 1956, he went to London to attend the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Staff School. While in London, he submitted the manuscript for *Things Fall Apart* to a publisher, with the encouragement and support of one of his BBC instructors, a writer and literary critic. The novel was published in 1958 by Heinemann, a publishing firm that began a long relationship with Achebe and his work. Fame came almost instantly. Achebe has said that he never experienced the life of a struggling writer.

Upon returning to Nigeria, Achebe rose rapidly within the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. As founder and director of the Voice of Nigeria in 1961, Achebe and his colleagues aimed at developing more national identity and unity through radio programs that highlighted Nigerian affairs and culture.

Political Problems

Turmoil in Nigeria from 1966 to 1972 was matched by turmoil for Achebe. In 1966, young Igbo officers in the Nigerian army staged a coup d'état. Six months later, another coup by non-Igbo officers overthrew the Igbo-led government. The new government targeted Achebe for persecution, knowing that his views were unsympathetic to the new regime. Achebe fled to Nsukka in eastern Nigeria, which is predominantly Igbo-speaking, and he became a senior research fellow at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. In 1967, the eastern part of Nigeria declared independence as the nation of Biafra. This incident triggered thirty months of civil war that ended only when Biafra was defeated. Achebe then fled to Europe and America, where he wrote and talked about Biafran affairs.

Later Writing

Like many other African writers, Achebe believes that artistic and literary works must deal primarily with the problems of society. He has said that “art is, and always was, at the service of man” rather than an end in itself, accountable to no one. He believes that “any good story, any good novel, should have a message, should have a purpose.”

Continuing his relationship with Heinemann, Achebe published four other novels: *No Longer at Ease* (the 1960 sequel to *Things Fall Apart*), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). He also wrote and published several children's books that express his basic views in forms and language understandable to young readers.

In his later books, Achebe confronts the problems faced by Nigeria and other newly independent African nations. He blames the nation's problems on the lack of leadership in Nigeria since its independence. In 1983, he published *The Trouble with Nigeria*, a critique of corrupt politicians in his country. Achebe has also published two collections of short stories and three collections of essays. He is the founding editor of Heinemann's African Writers series; the founder and publisher of *Uwa Ndi Igbo: A Bilingual Journal of Igbo Life and Arts*; and the editor of the magazine *Okike*, Nigeria's leading journal of new writing.

Teaching

In addition to his writing career, Achebe has maintained an active teaching career. In 1972, he was appointed to a three-year visiting professorship at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and, in 1975, to a one-year visiting professorship at the University of Connecticut. In 1976, with matters sufficiently calm in Nigeria, he returned as professor of English at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, with which he had been affiliated since 1966. In 1990, he became the Charles P. Stevenson, Jr., professor of literature at Bard College, Annandale, New York.

Literary Awards

Achebe has received many awards from academic and cultural institutions around the world. In 1959, he won the Margaret Wong Memorial Prize for *Things Fall Apart*. The following year, after the publication of its sequel, *No Longer At Ease*, he was awarded the Nigerian National Trophy for Literature. His book of poetry, *Christmas in Biafra*, written during the Nigerian civil war, won the first Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1972. More than twenty universities in Great Britain, Canada, Nigeria, and the United States have awarded Achebe honorary degrees.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

The following Introduction section is provided solely as an educational tool and is not meant to replace the experience of your reading the work. Read the Introduction and A Brief Synopsis to enhance your understanding of the work and to prepare yourself for the critical thinking that should take place whenever you read any work of fiction or nonfiction. Keep the List of Characters and Character Map at hand so that as you read the original literary work, if you encounter a character about whom you're uncertain, you can refer to the List of Characters and Character Map to refresh your memory.

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Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is probably the most authentic narrative ever written about life in Nigeria at the turn of the twentieth century. Although the novel was first published in 1958—two years before Nigeria achieved its independence—thousands of copies are still sold every year in the United States alone. Millions of copies have been sold around the world in its many translations. The novel has been adapted for productions on the stage, on the radio, and on television. Teachers in high schools, colleges, and graduate schools use the novel as a textbook in many types of classes—from history and social studies to comparative literature and anthropology.

The novel takes its title from a verse in the poem “The Second Coming” by W. B. Yeats, an Irish poet, essayist, and dramatist:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

In this poem—ironically, a product of European thought—Yeats describes an apocalyptic vision in which the world collapses into anarchy because of an internal flaw in humanity. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe illustrates this vision by showing us what happened in the Igbo society of Nigeria at the time of its colonization by the British. Because of internal weaknesses within the native structure and the divided nature of Igbo society, the community of Umuofia in this novel is unable to withstand the tidal wave of foreign religion, commerce, technology, and government. In “The Second Coming,” Yeats evokes the anti-Christ leading an anarchic world to destruction. This ominous tone gradually emerges in *Things Fall Apart* as an intrusive religious presence and an insensitive government together cause the traditional Umuofian world to fall apart.

Literary Purpose

When *Things Fall Apart* was first published, Achebe announced that one of his purposes was to present a complex, dynamic society to a Western audience who perceived African society as primitive, simple, and backward. Unless Africans could tell their side of their story, Achebe

believed that the African experience would forever be “mistold,” even by such well-meaning authors as Joyce Cary in *Mister Johnson*. Cary worked in Nigeria as a colonial administrator and was sympathetic to the Nigerian people. Yet Achebe feels that Cary, along with other Western writers such as Joseph Conrad, misunderstood Africa. Many European writers have presented the continent as a dark place inhabited by people with impenetrable, primitive minds; Achebe considers this reductionist portrayal of Africa racist. He points to Conrad, who wrote against imperialism but reduced Africans to mysterious, animalistic, and exotic “others.” In an interview published in 1994, Achebe explains that his anger about the inaccurate portrayal of African culture by white colonial writers does not imply that students should not read works by Conrad or Cary. On the contrary, Achebe urges students to read such works in order to better understand the racism of the colonial era.

Achebe also kept in mind his own Nigerian people as an audience. In 1964, he stated his goal: “To help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. . . . I would be quite satisfied if my novels . . . did no more than teach my [African] 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.”

In *Things Fall Apart*, the Europeans’ understanding of Africa is particularly exemplified in two characters: the Reverend James Smith and the unnamed District Commissioner. Mr. Smith sees no need to compromise on unquestionable religious doctrine or practices, even during their introduction to a society very different from his own. He simply does not recognize any benefit for allowing the Nigerians to retain elements of their heritage. The District Commissioner, on the other hand, prides himself on being a student of primitive customs and sees himself as a benevolent leader who has only the best intentions for pacifying the primitive tribes and bringing them into the modern era. Both men would express surprise if anyone suggested to them that their European values may not be entirely appropriate for these societies. The Commissioner’s plan for briefly treating the story of Okonkwo illustrates the inclination toward Western simplification and essentialization of African culture.

To counter this inclination, Achebe brings to life an African culture with a religion, a government, a system of money, and an artistic

tradition, as well as a judicial system. While technologically unsophisticated, the Igbo culture is revealed to the reader as remarkably complex. Furthermore, *Things Fall Apart* ironically reverses the style of novels by such writers as Conrad and Cary, who created flat and stereotypical African characters. Instead, Achebe stereotypes the white colonialists as rigid, most with imperialistic intentions, whereas the Igbos are highly individual, many of them open to new ideas.

But readers should note that Achebe is not presenting Igbo culture as faultless and idyllic. Indeed, Achebe would contest such a romantic portrayal of his native people. In fact, many Western writers who wrote about colonialism (including Joseph Conrad, George Orwell, Herman Melville, and Graham Greene) were opposed to imperialism but were romantic in their portrayal of noble savages—primitive and animalistic, yet uncorrupted and innocent. The opposition to imperialism that such authors voiced often rested on the notion that an advanced Western society corrupts and destroys the non-Western world. Achebe regards this notion as an unacceptable argument as well as a myth. The Igbos were not noble savages, and although the Igbo world was eventually destroyed, the indigenous culture was never an idyllic haven, even before the arrival of the white colonialists. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe depicts negative as well as positive elements of Igbo culture, and he is sometimes as critical of his own people as he is of the colonizers.

Achebe has been a major force in the worldwide literary movement to define and describe this African experience. Other postcolonial writers in this movement include Leopold Senghor, Wole Soyinka, Aime Cesaire, Derek Walcott, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Birago Diop. These writers not only confront a multiethnic perspective of history and truth, but they also challenge readers to reexamine themselves in this complex and evolving world.

As an African novel written in English and departing significantly from more familiar colonial writing, *Things Fall Apart* was a ground breaking work. Achebe's role in making modern African literature a part of world literature cannot be understated.

Note: Throughout this novel, Achebe uses the spelling *Ibo*, the old spelling of the Umuofian community. Throughout the CliffsNotes, the contemporary spelling *Igbo* is used.