



RG

Read  
Guide

# Achebe's **Things Fall Apart**

Ode Ogede



continuum

**ACHEBE'S  
THINGS FALL APART**

*A Reader's Guide*

ODE OGEDE



Continuum International Publishing Group  
The Tower Building  
11 York Road  
London  
SE1 7NX

80 Maiden Lane  
Suite 704  
New York  
NY 10038

First published 2007

© Ode Ogede 2007

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Ode Ogede has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN – 10: 0-8264-9083-2 (hardback)  
0-8264-9084-0 (paperback)  
ISBN – 13: 978-08264-9083-4 (hardback)  
978-08264-9084-1 (paperback)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Manchester  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

## **DEDICATION**

This book is gratefully dedicated to the memory of my father Ogede Ode (1907–2005). He told me it was on the way, but he did not live to hold it in his hands. In bringing his vision to pass, I have relied heavily upon the everlasting love of my beloved mother Ochuole Ode.

## PREFACE

Few works have ever been much more read and admired than Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Over the last 48 years or so, *Things Fall Apart* has figured prominently in the literature of several countries. Even if he had written no other, this slim book would have single-handedly secured the place of Africa's best-known novelist in any discussion of realistic historical fiction. Unarguably one of the world's greatest works of literary craftsmanship in the genre of fact-based fiction, *Things Fall Apart* is a heartfelt story of how change affects people's lives. A magnificent treasure trove of information, a highly suggestive and telling portrait of an era, it provides a deeper understanding of Africa at a significant period of its history and a formative time in European imperial expansion in Africa than exists in any other novel. Achebe looks into the history of Europe's encounter with Africa and discovers its origin in human ambitions and shows how equivalent passions lay in the hearts of colonial subjects. As the main purpose of this study will show, through close analysis of the rhetorical strategies used in his novel and the themes he covers, not only has Achebe fascinating and original things to say about an African society just prior to and during the nascent stage of colonial occupation in the continent, but he has also given readers a novel with an unequalled display of talent which ranks among the best works of world fiction, utilizing the pressure of recorded human events as the organizing principle of narrative structure.

*Things Fall Apart* can justifiably be considered the earliest novel to successfully bring together in a conglomerate many of the themes and narrative techniques that now define the genre of realistic historical fiction in modern African literature. It is unparalleled in its

## PREFACE

elegance, lucidity, and felicity of expression; today anyone with an idea of life in Africa either acquired it through *Things Fall Apart* or soon becomes acquainted with it, because it stands out as a novel that has unquestionably opened exceptional possibilities for the genre of realistic historical fiction to unlock a window on a fast-disappearing world. Before Achebe wrote this novel, the dominant fictional model for representing Africa did not extend far beyond stereotypical depiction of the continent as a landscape without people, a jungle inhabited by undifferentiated masses of savages. Achebe breaks away from this model, which is exemplified, most notably, by the novels of Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary, distills the unique essence of authentic African personalities and conveys that to readers. He does so through a compelling narration that marks gender differentiation with memorably cast in-depth evocations of decision-making and reasoning power displayed in activities such as household management, personal ambition, ritual observance, conversation, public debate, play and work, and the personality differences that further manifest themselves as people go about the daily business of living in their complexly organized societies.

Prima facie beginning with an image which closely approximates the reality of an African culture as it existed at about the time Africa was being opened up to European exploration and occupation, this model makes it easier for readers to understand why the violent cultural clashes which were progressively to weaken the communalistic ethos of Africa were so massively life-altering in their effects. In *Things Fall Apart*, author Achebe is not exclusively preoccupied with this drama of cross-cultural contact. But, writing concisely and wittily, he covers just enough about a decisive moment in the long and complex history of imperialism to enhance our understanding of the earliest phases of European conquest in West Africa. Examining the problems triggered by the imposition of external control and the resulting experiences of both a public and a private nature, he reveals in comprehensive detail a range of deadly emotions – anger, anxiety, condescension, radical rage and gaping dissatisfaction, desperation, inordinate ambition, inferiority complex, traumatic fear or insecurity, male superiority syndrome, shame, grief, possessiveness, impulsiveness – alternating with isolated moments of tenderness, filial love, and male friendship and female companionship, all of which ultimately outweigh the negative passions.

By placing the cultural history of an Igbo people in the context of

## PREFACE

issue of black aesthetics, that he 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' (72).

Although it was not Achebe's intention in offering these remarks to make a career-defining statement but simply to make his readers think about the way in which storytelling functions as a bridge between generations and as a means of passing wisdom from the very old to the young – and back again – little could he have known at the time that he was making statements that would have the unintended consequence of permanently locking the critical reception of his work into an unchanging predetermined pattern of anthropological criticism, one that would eventually lead to a stale orthodoxy. True enough, not only have his critics taken him at his word, but they have also continued to read *Things Fall Apart*, his most influential novel, primarily for its insights into African culture and history.

One of the propositions of this guide is to show that a more rewarding approach to *Things Fall Apart* must particularly also include those dazzling storytelling resources which unconsciously first draw readers to the novel and keep them riveted to it once they begin reading it: the inventive use of language, plot, setting, imagery, narrative devices, and characterization. The first chapter of this book situates the novel in its historical and cultural contexts. Chapter 2 focuses on the novel's stylistic range (its narrative technique – use of story-within-the-story, or anecdote, proverb lore, invigorated language, focalization, and management of plot). Chapter 3 deals with the key themes of the novel, such as the use of domestic life as a trope, the image of day-to-day village life, the patterns of play and work or contest, and the seasonal cycles of events, including falling in love and marriage, the position of women in society, the idea of pre-colonial law and order, festival, ritual, government and the dispensation of justice, and the colonial penetration; Chapter 4 with the critical responses to the novel and its influence. Drawing upon the best of recent scholarship, most of the material hopes to throw new light on the novel.

One further point. This guide is mandated by my sense that readers need to be supported and guided not only better to understand but also more fully to enjoy this outstanding novel, which,

## PREFACE

a struggle between order and disorder during the moment of European imperial invasion, Achebe not only vividly takes readers through the daily life of the people at a transitional period, he embarks on a delicately mapped excursion into the mind of the age, setting forth more compelling constructs of the hazards of the self-perpetuating force of ambition and desperate search for social rank within the African rural setting than hitherto presented in fiction set in Africa, both African and non-African. His double-framed yarn not only sheds fresh light on key aspects of the threatened culture of the people, providing insight into how they think of others and how they imagine themselves and their communities, but it also produces a masterful portrait of the goals and hidden assumptions that underwrote the colonial mission.

For many readers Achebe himself established the parameters within which his novels, especially *Things Fall Apart*, must be understood. The outlines of these ideas are sketched with special clarity in his early essay 'The Novelist as Teacher' (1965), in which he eloquently provides answers to many of the general questions that those interested in the novels emerging from the then new nations in Africa were asking. Chief among these were how the African novel would help to draw attention to some of the bewildering moral, ethical and political problems facing the people of the continent, whether the African writer himself or herself was going to be an imitator and fill a role commensurate with the conventional image of the Western author as an alienated figure, or if he or she would closely identify with society.

Though such large questions about the goals of narrative are never easy to tackle, Achebe would not be intimidated. So, he reminded his then newly emerging audience of readers to be aware of the significance which the art of storytelling was acquiring for his new nation, as deriving its special effect from leading the people to a larger understanding of their cultural heritage. He also made known that he personally sees his novelistic ambition as being to 'help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet' (reprinted in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, 1975: 71). He goes on to add that it is the duty of the African writer to lead 'the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done' (72). He then comments on the

## PREFACE

more than any other, has shaped the way Africa and the literature that has emerged out of the region are viewed both within and outside it, and which thus can reasonably be considered a legitimate contender for the status of the continent's best cultural capital and pre-eminent export to the world's literary community.

## CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 The Contexts of Achebe's Writings	1
2 Unity and Variety in Structure, Language, Style and Form	17
3 Reading <i>Things Fall Apart</i> : The Communal World, the Embattled Zones of Conquest, and the Decline of Tradition	39
4 Critical Reception, Interpretation and Afterlife (Adaptation and Influence)	83
<i>Notes</i>	95
<i>Guide to further reading</i>	103
<i>Bibliography</i>	107
<i>Index</i>	117

## CHAPTER 1

### THE CONTEXTS OF ACHEBE'S WRITINGS

As might be expected, because all literature bears significant traces of its context of production, an attempt to understand both the unique texture and the achievement of *Things Fall Apart* as a landmark work of art must begin with the one singular event that placed Africa generally and the novel's more immediate Nigerian (Igbo) society specifically – the primary subjects of all Achebe's fiction – in their current states: the imposition of colonialism on Africa. This was formalized by the coming together of the empire-building European powers (Britain and Belgium, France, Germany, Portugal and Spain) to divide Africa up among themselves at the Berlin Conference of 1884–5. That event, commonly called 'the partition of Africa', was originally conceived as part of a strategy to co-ordinate the ongoing scramble among the major European powers for what was then regarded as the Dark Continent. Ironically, the attempt to mediate the conflicting claims and counter-claims over the portions of Africa that each of the major European powers wanted for exclusive commercial control quickly led to one of the most catastrophic events in the continent's history: termination of autonomy or self-rule, and transformation of traditional village life hitherto enjoyed by African peoples all over their continent.

Without doubt, a surprising aspect of the European occupation and domination of Africa is that it came about as a remote consequence of schemes brought to bear to facilitate the abolition and suppression of the slave trade. Precisely at the time Africans were beginning to enjoy the fruits of legitimate trade as natural products such as cotton, ivory, gum or copal, honey and coffee started to effectively replace human beings as the mainstay of their external economies, resulting in widespread distribution of wealth among all

classes of African societies, complications arose. A combination of factors joined forces to make European powers unable to resist the idea of taking actual political control of the African continent. Not the least significant of these elements were calculations relating to how European powers could monopolize and maximize profits from this external trade with Africa, as well as ideas regarding the burden of bringing enlightenment to the dark corners of the world. Thus, the years 1892 to 1904 saw the forcible imposition of colonialism by Britain on virtually all of the areas now known as Nigeria – a region to which Britain was assigned during the partition and which it ruled until 1960, within the same period that other parts of Africa were being opened up to occupation by various other European powers.

In the view of the eminent Ghanaian historian Adu Boahen, colonial conquest was a bloody affair that took the lives of countless Africans in addition to displacing many others from their homes. But aside from its obvious brutality, colonization also unleashed other far-reaching, long-term traumatic consequences: it altered dramatically the cultural, economic, social and political climate of the continent (1987: 34–57). As one of the best historians of colonialism in Africa, Boahen is better qualified than anyone to make an informed assessment of that venture, and it has been confirmed by other commentators that we have not yet fully calculated the devastation colonization caused Africa because the effects of colonial rule are continuing.<sup>1</sup> Usually included among the costs are the effects of economic dispossession, cultural confusion, or mental displacement, psychological disorientation, and inferiority complexes.

In theory, the Indirect Rule system of government is generally considered to be the least malevolent form of colonial rule. But even that approach to colonial rule had a destabilizing influence on the native affairs of African peoples, despite the British colonial government's avowal to assist the overseas territories to retain and preserve their traditions. Regardless of good intentions, even Indirect Rule introduced new customs regarding education, justice, work, social ranking or status, religious observance, political authority, marriage and burial, as well as ideas of honour and selfhood that were alien. And colonization could not avoid creating standards or expectations regarding duties, obligations and affiliations between individuals and the rulers that were not only intimidating to everyone among the conquered but also especially disorienting for young subject peoples.

The subjugation of Igboland was particularly sweeping. In his

absorbing biography of Achebe, Ezenwa-Ohaeto attributes the pervasive sense of disorientation and the breadth and depth of dislocations within the communities to the lethal combination of forces with which the assault of colonization was mounted. The plot to overthrow the old order was unveiled in such a diligent manner that, 'after several expeditions', while the violence-prone military wing of colonial power was 'entrenching its authority over the society; the missionaries, too, were consolidating their spiritual influence after the efforts of their pioneers; the economy was being reordered to reflect new commercial interests; and Western education was seen increasingly as providing opportunities for the acquisition of power and prestige' (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1997: 1).

Chinua Achebe was born in 1930 at the village of Ogidi in the then eastern region of Nigeria, now Anambra State, and he grew up there during this deeply troubled transitional period. He received his primary education at St Philip's Central School, Akpakaogwe Ogidi, then entered Government College, Umuahia, one of the most selective schools in West Africa at the time, on a competitive Owerri Provincial Scholarship. In 1948, he enrolled at the University College, Ibadan, first as a medical student, and then later changed his course of study to literature. The period saw bitter and contentious developments; in the midst of revolutionary changes threatening to sweep away their native customs, a large number of Igbo people held on tenaciously to those traditions and so 'farming and trading remained the major occupations; there were still musicians, hunters, blacksmiths, builders, carvers and, to a lesser extent, fishermen along the streams of rivers. The festivals associated with various communities, often based on religious rites, were still held, although the zeal of some converts to the Christian religion, and the resistance of adherents to the old traditions, sometimes met in conflict' (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1997: 1).

Like many other African groups, the key experiences that the Igbos came to associate with colonial rule were the violence, paternalism and repression that attended the European 'civilizing mission'. The attempt by the colonialists to turn Igbos into imitation whites caused major realignments of values, leading to no small consternation and cultural confusion. By reconstituting both traditional political boundaries and the bases of authority among the Igbos, colonial rule also brought about a profound and systematic displacement of the people's traditional systems of justice. The

action of certain minority elements within Igbo communities, who desperately hoped and yearned for integration between themselves and the occupation forces while this (to the majority) unsettling process was slowly unfolding, starkly exposed a fantasy of assimilation that reflected the contradictions of the colonial encounter: the fact that, because of internal divisions within their ranks, throughout the period of European invasion, the Igbos could not present a monolithic and unified resistance.

Ironically, while the Igbo societies' rejection of some of their members as equal human beings caused a separation between them, forcing those consigned to the sphere of the inferior to seek social uplift through pacts with the European occupation forces, what these renegade groups could not suspect was that meaningful integration (or structural assimilation) was not a realizable goal due to the fact that competitiveness would, in turn, force the dominant group to seek to preserve its advantage by depriving the conquered community of the ability to compete effectively as one unit.

So powerful is this obsession with integration among a segment of the Igbo society depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, however, that the craving itself is given concrete form in symbolic names such as those given to the novel's author, who was christened Albert Chinualumogwu Achebe. An agglomeration of familiar and unfamiliar terms based on ideas very dear to his parents, Achebe was named Albert after the husband of Queen Victoria, the then reigning monarch of England, as both a statement of his parents' assimilationist aspirations and a sign of seduction by what Achille Mbembe elsewhere has called 'the charms of majesty . . . the splendor of those exercising the trappings of authority' (2001: 110). On its part, Achebe's Igbo name Chinualumogwu ('May God fight on my behalf') expresses a prayer that reflects his parents' accommodationist outlook and faith in peaceful co-existence.

Indeed, in light of the importance attached to naming by the Igbos, the significance of Achebe's names cannot be overlooked. According to Archbishop Arinze (now Cardinal), for instance, among the Igbos, 'a person's name is chosen with care. It has meaning of its own, sometimes the names of children in a large family are a short account of the fortunes of that family: its joys and its sorrows, its hopes and its fears' (1975: 188). It bears testimony of both their devotion and the integrity of their faith that young Achebe's pioneer Christian parents encountered no obstacles bring-

ing up their son in ways that enabled him quite early to internalize their values to the extent that he grew up with an imagination belligerently fired up to blend the old and new forces.

There's no doubt that growing up under the influence of Christian parents made him more hospitable to the idea of cultural fusion. Yet, despite young Achebe's desire to harmoniously bring Europe and Africa together, he did not hold any magic wands to wave those dreams into reality. The British colonial order dictated the direction of events, which went against both young Achebe's and his parents' wishes. So, with no silver bullets or quick fixes to offer, young Achebe's and his parents' generations helplessly witnessed the drama of accelerated social change unfolding in an opposing direction. They not only experienced the crushing legacy of foreign occupation of their homeland but also lived through the indignity of colonial subjugation and subsequent political independence without the critical conditions of true sovereignty, the requisite economic self-reliance or cultural freedom, to go with it to make political freedom authentic.

While reporting on growing up under colonial rule, many writers have attempted to downplay the suffering and pain that accompanied colonization, as if centuries of histories of colonial repression can be annihilated by assuming that they have not existed. Guinean author Camara Laye in *The African Child* (1955) and his Nigerian counterpart Cyprian Ekwensi in *People of the City* (1954) are prime examples. These writers do so, in part, because representing imperialism in all its brutality is taken by some as an attack upon the moral authority of its powerful originators, as a piece of the argument to force them to confront a political evil they would rather not acknowledge.

There are no indications that Achebe attaches slight significance to the social disruptions associated with colonialism for self-serving reasons (for example, to secure publication favours, as Laye is accused of), but this doesn't mean he couldn't have; anyone can do that without betraying his or her motives, and it's clear that plenty have. Though we cannot understand why some of his early essays like 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England' (1973) give the impression that colonialism was without major negative impacts, it is significant to note that not even that essay could entirely brush aside the havoc wreaked by colonialism because it is too stark to cover up. The only reason one can think of why Achebe would attempt to half cover up

and half reveal the alienating effects of colonialism, especially the confusion and disorder external control caused in the day-to-day lives of colonized peoples who were forced to live and work within settings thoroughly poisoned by rigid imported ideas of rank and status, is to convey his fascination with the idea of Igbo and European cultures co-existing on an equal footing, a concept of cross-cultural interaction which he himself characterizes as a 'cross-roads of cultures' (1975: 119).

But his essayistic representations of the stances of the Igbo encounter with Europe as a graceful fusion of cultures convey a delight at the prospect of syncretism that was quite disproportionate to the historical reality of tension. 'I was born in Ogidi in Eastern Nigeria of devout Christian parents', he writes, and describes the time as distinguished by huge segregation of 'Christian and non-Christian'. He adds:

When I was growing up I remember we tended to look down on the others. We were called in our language 'the people of the church' or 'the association of God.' The others were called . . . the heathen or even 'the people of nothing.' . . . We lived at the cross-roads of cultures. We still do today . . . On one arm of the cross, we sang hymns and read the Bible night and day. On the other, my father's brother and his family, blinded by heathenism, offered food to the idols. That was how it was supposed to be anyhow. But I knew without knowing why, that it was too simple a way to describe what was going on. Those idols and that food had a strange pull on me in spite of my being such a thorough little Christian that often at Sunday services at the height of the grandeur of the 'Deum laudamus' I would have dreams of a mantle of gold falling on me as the choir of angels drowned our mortal song and the voice of God Himself thundered: This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased. Yes, despite those delusions of divine destiny I was not past taking my little sister to our neighbor's house when our parents were not looking and partaking of heathen festival meals. I never found their rice and stew to have the flavor of idolatry. I was about ten then. If anyone likes to believe that I was torn by spiritual agonies or stretched on the rack of my ambivalence, he certainly may suit himself. I do not remember any undue distress. What I do remember was a fascination for the ritual and the life on the other arm of the cross-

roads. And I believe two things were in my favor – that curiosity and little distance imposed between me and it by the accident of my birth. The distance becomes not a separation but a bringing together like the necessary backward step which a judicious viewer may take in order to see a canvas steadily and fully. ('Named for Victoria', reprinted in *Morning Yet On Creation Day*, 1975: 119–20)

In examining this revealing moment of autobiographical commentary, much can be said. One can begin with the matter of what has to be admitted as Achebe's apparent early alienation from the collective experience of his community.<sup>2</sup> That piece of information concerning the mental disposition of the person who would later become Nigeria's foremost novelist is intimated perhaps unintentionally by his disquisitions on hybridity. But the disclosure of the state of things is no less telling for all that. It reveals a calm in the face of overwhelming evidence that the concerns of colonial policy were to divide his native people into good and bad, desirable and undesirable neighbours. By instigating mutual suspicion among Igbos, colonial rule segregated them into distinct camps, making each group of native people keep its distance from the other even further. As he himself observes in this report, colonialism pathologizes human interaction. Its organizing principle of governance devolved upon a dissolution of social bonds. By arousing rival emotional impulses regarding hierarchies of class and rank that either provoked pride or social embarrassment, as the case may be, among its Igbo subjects, colonial rule aggressively kept them divided. But notice the cool, dispassionate stance adopted by the report, complete with its ironic observations and its undercurrent of humour. It is prompted by Achebe's yielding to ideals that intrigue him irresistibly: cross-cultural interaction as an opportunity for unity instead of the alienation that imperialism actually created. The conception therefore seems to smooth over the real harsh conditions of colonial rule, a negation of the overbearing attitude which shadowed the activities of British colonial officials and caused them by and large to use contact as a site of control and segregation, as a force of difference rather than of merger.

In his essay 'The Arts in Africa During the Period of Colonial Rule' (1985), leading Nigerian author and Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka more accurately calls the period of colonial domination in