Society of Young Nigerian Writers

IGBO

Searchlight
Africa, Igbo Culture, and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

**Purpose**

This lesson provides an opportunity for you to read literature from around Africa, ultimately focusing on a novel by Chinua Achebe. The purpose of this lesson is to enable you to get a sense of how literature can both reflect on a specific set of cultural values and also be universally understood and enjoyed. This lesson also serves as an introduction to Lesson 3.

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**Learning Objectives**

After completing this lesson, you should be able to accomplish the following:

1. Discuss Okonkwo as a tragic hero.
2. Explain the components of Igbo culture and compare and contrast it with western culture.
3. Discuss the assimilation of Umuofia and the Igbo into the British system.
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**Reading Assignment**

*The HarperCollins World Reader: The Modern World:*

- Khoi People—"Song for the Sun That Disappeared Behind the Rainclouds," page 1745
- Vai People of Liberia—"The Wax Doll," pages 1745–1746
- Gabriel Okara—"You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed," pages 1757–1758
- Agostinho Neto—"Western Civilisation," pages 1761–1762
- Ngugi Wa Thiong'O—"National Identity and Imperialist Domination," pages 1815–1818
- Ingrid de Kok—"Small Passing," pages 1913–1915

*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (entire novel)

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**Commentary**

One way to begin exploring a region's literature is to examine your own initial perceptions of that region, and then to look back upon those perceptions as you read. In the past decade or more, Africa and its individual nations have appeared in the nightly news quite frequently, so even those people who have never traveled outside of America, or even outside their own states, should have some vague ideas and opinions regarding Africa.

Before reading Achebe's novel, read the selections out of *The HarperCollins World Reader: The Modern World.* These should serve as a partial introduction to African literature and provide
some background for *Things Fall Apart*. Keep in mind, however, that such an introduction can only serve to reveal a tiny portion of literature from this vast continent of over four dozen countries and over a thousand languages.

"*Song for the Sun*. . ." and "*The Wax Doll*

These two works serve as an introduction to the rich oral traditions of two separate African tribal groups. The Khoi people are shepherds and hunters from Southern Africa; the Vai people are farmers from Liberia on the west coast of Africa (see page 2712 in *The HarperCollins World Reader: The Modern World* for a world map). Yet the oral traditions preserve and reflect the cultural values of each tribe. The Khoi people, who have hunted in dry savannahs for centuries, are no strangers to adverse conditions and change, as "*Song for the Sun*. . ." indicates:

"The fire darkens, the wood turns black. The flame extinguishes, misfortune upon us." (lines 1–2)

This metaphor of the fire becomes the vanishing sun, and God becomes a divine hero (or "hunter") in the form of a woman who cares for people ("children") and goes forth to help them. The repetition of the phrase "piles them up" gives a song-like quality to the poem, which was meant to be memorized and recited. The phrase also connects God to the figure of the woman in the poem, both of them piling up necessary items in their baskets: lizards for the woman (presumably for food), and sunlight for God.

"*The Wax Doll*" is directly linked to tales from African-American slaves in pre-Civil War America: think of Br'er Rabbit and the Tar Baby. The story in and of itself is entertaining: there is a villain (Spider), a magical helper (the priest), a clever trap for Spider (the wax doll), and a
dispensation of justice (Spider's public humiliation and death). "The Wax Doll" also serves to emphasize the importance of community to the Vai people. Shirkers like Spider do not help the village but instead act as a kind of greedy parasite. For farmers, whose lives are precarious enough, subject as they are to weather fluctuations such as floods and droughts, shirkers are dangerous, even destructive. As the notes in *The HarperCollins World Reader* suggest, "Trickster" characters like Spider are common in world literature (including Coyote in Native American legends, Loki in Norse mythology, and Hermes in Greek mythology), and often they get away with antisocial behavior. However, for the Vai people, Spider violates a basic social value by cheating his fellow animals of food and is therefore destroyed for his actions.

"You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed" and "Western Civilisation"

Okara's poem, "You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed," serves to introduce the clash of Western and African cultures from a Nigerian perspective. (You will notice later in this lesson that Achebe deals with similar conflicts in *Things Fall Apart.*) Addressed to a Westerner, Okara's poem begins by describing the lack of communication brought about by the way the Westerner hears things in technological terms: "In your ears my song / is motor car misfiring / stopping with a choking cough"(lines 1–3) and the way the Westerner, through his laughter, dismisses what the native African speaker is trying to reveal: "You laughed at my song, / You laughed at my walk" (lines 9–10). Even when the speaker dances his "magic dance" (line 11) and completely reveals himself to the Westerner—"And then I opened my mystic / inside wide like / the sky" (lines 14–16)—the Westerner continues to laugh and climbs into his car, secure in his technological superiority. The laughter of the Westerner becomes related to ice, a potent metaphor; it "freezes" the Westerner and keeps him from understanding or progressing. Yet the
speaker's own laughter, he tells the Westerner, "is not / ice-block laughter. For I / know not cars, know not ice-blocks" (lines 26–28). Instead, the speaker's laughter is "fire" and related to natural forces: the earth, air, seas, and rivers. Such laughter, the speaker indicates, is far stronger than the Westerner's laughter, and indeed "thaws out" the Westerner, leaving him meek and chastened, finally speaking instead of laughing. It is important to note that, at the end of the poem, the Westerner asks the speaker questions, indicating his own lack of knowledge and his subservience to the speaker after several lines of condescending behavior. For Okara, Africans hold a power and a sense of dignity that Westerners such as the one in the poem should not ignore but often do.

Agostinho Neto, whose name suggests his own European (Portuguese) ancestry, writes of how Western civilization has reduced Africa to a horrifyingly barren land. In his poem, he describes a house that is now only "Sheets of tin nailed to posts / driven in the ground" (lines 1–2). A handful of "rags" serves to complete what Neto sarcastically refers to as "the intimate landscape" (line 5). The owner of the house is exhausted after hours of backbreaking work, work that is heavy and repetitious, as revealed in lines 10–17. Such work provides no consolation, no sense of accomplishment (how can breaking and shifting rock accomplish anything?), only a weary desire to die "of hunger" (line 22). While Okara's poem suggests that exploitative Westerners can indeed learn the error of their ways, Neto's poem seems to say that it is too late.

"National Identity and Imperialist Domination"

Ngugi, a Kenyan author who was educated in England, eventually rejected Western influences to become a political activist and was jailed by the Kenyan government for his calls for socialist revolution. This short essay serves to explain his own views of how modern Africa is caught in a
cultural crisis created by centuries of European colonization and imperialism. Imperialism can be defined briefly as the extension of rule over one nation by another. In ancient Western history, for example, Alexander the Great conquered an area of land stretching from the Mediterranean basin to India, while the Roman Empire controlled Europe, North Africa, and much of the Middle East. Like many native Africans, Ngugi denounces imperialist domination by European countries and blames such policies for the situation in which modern-day Africans find themselves. Having been taught by Western values that their rural cultures are backward and their tradition bad, many young Africans leave their villages behind. Yet they discover that the city, with its inherently rapid changes and isolation—all the hallmarks of modernity—provides no stability either. In essence, they are trapped between rural and urban poverty. Ngugi argues that modernity and tradition are complementary, not warring opposites. He believes that the technological aspects of modernity, such as television and radio, could be used to promote traditional values, rather like an updated version of the oral tradition as seen in the poetry and stories of the Khoi and Vai peoples.

Ngugi also argues from a historical (and Marxist) perspective that rural peasants, fed up with their primitive existence, were forced to flee to towns, where they became even more controlled by the "bourgeoisie," or wealthy middle class. How many movies and stories can you think of that are about small-town heroes who travel to the big city and are corrupted or destroyed, or at least have to fight off such forces? In real life, Ngugi argues, such heroes do not prevail. Instead, they become the inhabitants of third-world nations, poor developing countries that were created by European colonizers and have been exploited by such powers for centuries. Such exploitation was not only economic, Ngugi says, but also cultural. The only way to subjugate a native people is to control their minds. To do that, the imperialist destroys native religion, ritual, and language
and replaces it with his own. This domination has resulted in the rising native political parties and the calls for political freedom and independence, which have now reached a crisis point. Ngugi's ideology is not favorable to capitalism or to Western nations as a whole, so at first reading, it may be difficult for an American audience to appreciate. But his words speak to an underlying dissatisfaction and anger that many Africans hold toward the West. Witness the demolishing of apartheid (state-supported racial segregation and white supremacy) in South Africa during the 1990s, in which native Africans overthrew an Afrikaaner government comprised of whites with European-Dutch backgrounds. Native Africans have suffered much under European powers in the past. They are only now coming to terms with their place in the world as independent nations and people.

"Small Passing"

Many of the initial ideas in this section of the commentary come from Tessa Guffey, a student of mine who wrote a term paper explicating this poem by Ingrid de Kok. De Kok, a white South African writer, wishes to break down racial barriers and recognize all people's suffering as unjust. As a white woman in South Africa, de Kok's sympathy with the suffering of whites might not be seen in the most positive light, given the current state of South Africa's government and its investigations into past years of torture and abuse of blacks at the hands of whites. Nevertheless, de Kok's poem challenges its readers to put aside political and racial differences and work toward a "nonracial solidarity."

If you read the introduction to the poem, you will see that the poem is based on a statement made to a white woman whose child died stillborn. The woman was told to stop mourning the loss of her child "because the trials and horrors suffered daily by black women in this country are more
significant than the loss of one white child." Such a callous attitude seems responsible for the list of commands in the first stanza: the speaker lists all of the things she may not do "in this country," all of them circling the idea of mourning her dead child, which is seen as a "small passing" (line 14), its significance reduced and minimized. The remaining stanzas of section 1 comment on the black population and their hardships, contrasting them with the "small passing" of the white woman's stillborn child: the "newspaper boy" (line 15) who sleeps in a doorway in the rain; the baby who "will be sent to a tired aunt" (line 21) and "return a stranger" (line 23); the woman with the heavy hands who drops and breaks photographs of her children; the black nannies meeting in the street—and the reference to apartheid's harsh laws about the gatherings of blacks.

Section 2 moves back to the infant with the powerful and startling image of its first line: "Small wrist in the grave" (line 36). The images here become more disturbing, even violent, and the speaker connects these events of death, starvation, and pregnancy with erosion, as if society were eroding, just as soil does under a hard rain. At this point, no mention of race appears. The suffering becomes universal, not just confined to black people or white people.

In section 3, the speaker mentions mothers, another universal figure, and their mourning, which embraces everyone. The speaker suggests hope in these lines: "They will not tell you your suffering is white. / They will not say it is just as well. / They will not compete for the ashes of the infants" (lines 50 and 52). Mothers will instead comfort those who mourn, let the mother of the stillborn child weep, even replace the lost child. They will, as the final lines state, "arm you with one of our babies / to carry home on your back" (lines 57–58). In effect, de Kok sees a nation of mothers who rise up against the suffering and horrors of their lives and provide comfort
to one another regardless of race or politics. In this poem, a human ideal is placed above political or racial backgrounds—compassion cancels out ideology.

Now that you have had some introduction to African literature, you should be better prepared to read the novel by Chinue Achebe, *Things Fall Apart.*

*Things Fall Apart: Historical Background of Nigeria*

The country of Nigeria has long been a crossroads of African cultures. Today, the Protestant Yoruba people (see Lesson 3 for more on them and their literature) live in the western section of the country, while the Muslim Hausa-Fulani occupy the north. Achebe's novel deals with the Catholic Igbo of the east, specifically with their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century associations with British missionaries and imperialists. (Note: While Okonkwo's people are referred to as "Ibo" in *Things Fall Apart*, the modernized spelling is "Igbo." I will use the modern spelling throughout this lesson.)

Nigeria was initially populated between 5000–2000 B.C. by Saharan inhabitants who fled south, away from the expanding deserts. By 900 A.D., the region was organized into states, which traded slaves, salt, ivory, metal, and weapons. By the fifteenth century, the Portuguese had arrived on the western coast to trade, and the Aro priestly class was managing a famous oracle much like the one in *Things Fall Apart*. The Aro class also managed an active slave trade, which grew throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1861, Great Britain, which had outlawed the slave trade in 1807, occupied Lagos on the western edge of the Nigerian coastline. Slowly England began to occupy the rest of Nigeria, and at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885—
during which European nations carved up Africa among themselves like so much cheese—England gained what is now the state of Nigeria, gave it its name, and declared it a colony.

Table 2.1

Nigeria: A Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1807</td>
<td>Great Britain outlaws the slave trade that had been operated on the western coast of Nigeria by the Portuguese throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>Great Britain begins to occupy portions of Nigeria.</td>
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<td>1884</td>
<td>England gains control over Nigeria.</td>
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<td>1905</td>
<td>Natives kill a white man in southern region; the British retaliate against the Igbo.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>The British institute the Collective Punishment Ordinance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>England institutes a ten-year plan for Nigerian independence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Nigeria gains independence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Nigeria becomes a republic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Nigeria undergoes a civil war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s–2000s</td>
<td>Nigeria continues to face struggles brought about by internal strife, and economic decline.</td>
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In 1905, a white man on a bicycle was killed by natives in the southern region of the country, an episode that strongly influenced the massacre at Abame depicted in chapter fifteen of *Things Fall Apart*. The British killed natives in reprisal and organized an expedition to root out Igbo opposition to British colonialism. In 1912, the British instituted the Collective Punishment Ordinance, which held entire villages accountable for crimes committed against colonists. The
British administrative system, which replaced old tribal systems of justice, was backed by the military. Yet this system also served to educate large numbers of Nigerians, sending many of them to England. This policy led to the rise of several well-educated Nigerians, such as Chinua Achebe, who later agitated for independence from England.

In 1947, the English instituted a ten-year plan for Nigerian independence. In 1960, Nigeria gained its independence and became a republic in 1963. However, like many other emerging African nations, Nigeria underwent a civil war, lasting from 1967–1970. The discovery of oil under Nigerian land led to an economic boom after the period of internal strife, but destabilizing oil prices in the 1980s led to economic decline, then a series of coups throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Today, Nigeria is one of the largest nations of Africa, with a vast array of natural resources, yet it is still plagued by internal struggles and a difficult past.

**Background of Author**

Chinua Achebe, the author of *Things Fall Apart* and several other novels, was born in an Igbo village in eastern Nigeria in 1930, when the nation was still a British colony. Named Albert after Prince Albert of England (the husband of Queen Victoria), Achebe later chose the Igbo name of Chinua. After learning about and developing an appreciation for Igbo language and culture, Achebe began learning English at age eight. He attended Government College in Umuahia, where he excelled, and he studied medicine at the new University College at Ibadan. At this time, there was a demand for educated Nigerians to replace the British civil servants, who were expected to leave once Nigeria became independent. Yet Achebe, perhaps influenced by the growing sense of Nigerian independence and nationalism, changed his studies from medicine to
liberal arts—specifically history, religion, and English—and he began publishing stories that portrayed conflicts between Western culture and African society.

In 1953, Achebe graduated to become a radio producer and went to the BBC school in London in 1956. At that time he submitted a manuscript of *Things Fall Apart* to a publisher with BBC encouragement. Published in 1958, *Things Fall Apart* brought Achebe almost instant international fame; Achebe himself has said that he never experienced the troubles of a struggling artist.

Achebe returned to Nigeria and rose rapidly within the Nigerian Broadcast Corporation, but then became embroiled in the turmoil and civil war, following a 1966 coup led by Igbo officers. Six months later, another coup was staged, this time by non-Igbo officers, and the new government targeted Achebe, among others, for aiding the earlier Igbo coup. Achebe left for eastern Nigeria and became a senior research fellow at the University of Nigeria. In 1967, eastern Nigeria declared independence as the nation of Biafra. Thirty months of civil war culminated in Biafra's defeat, and Achebe fled to Europe and America to write and talk about Biafran affairs.

Like many other African writers, Achebe believes that artistic and literary works must deal primarily with the problems of society and should have a message that speaks toward those problems. He has written about Nigerian problems, corruption, and lack of leadership, and for a time taught at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and at the University of Connecticut. In 1976, he returned to Nigeria to teach for a while at the University of Nigeria. In 1990, he became a professor of literature at Bard College in Annandale, New York. He has received numerous awards and honorary degrees for his work, which includes several novels, children's
books, collections of short stories and essays, and magazines that he has founded, published, and edited.

**Introduction to Things Fall Apart**

Achebe chose lines from a poem by William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," to introduce his novel and to give it its title. (You can read these lines in the introductory pages of *Things Fall Apart.*) Ironically, Yeats was an Irish (European), not an African, poet. In this poem, Yeats describes an apocalyptic vision of the world, in which all order and stability collapses into anarchy ("Things fall apart; the center cannot hold") because of an internal flaw in humanity. This vision works on two levels in this novel. On the one hand, we see the protagonist, Okonkwo, as a great man of Umuofia, who succumbs to tragedy due to his own flaws (see below for a discussion of "Okonkwo as a Tragic Hero in Things Fall Apart"). On the other hand, we see the disintegration of the complex Igbo society under the intrusion of European government, religion, and technology.

Besides being a classic example of a tragedy, *Things Fall Apart* also has a social purpose. Achebe has argued that European novels have treated Africa as a dark, savage continent, and little else. Africans are reduced to primitive, mysterious creatures, which in Achebe's (and others') opinion is racist stereotyping. Even "good" African characters are flat and non-developed and are often portrayed as "noble savages," which is no better than any other stereotype. According to Achebe, colonialism—the forceful impression of one culture's beliefs onto another culture—leads to this kind of thinking. As Achebe himself has put it, Europeans portray Africa as having experienced "one long night of savagery, from which the first Europeans, acting on God's behalf, delivered them." Achebe is extremely opposed to this vision, which he says is
enforced by such novels as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and he has said that his role as an author is, in part, to teach fellow Africans and others that this "one long night of savagery" is an inaccurate depiction of a tribal past that denigrates the rich and sophisticated cultural traditions and values of the Igbo people, among others.

Achebe has written his works in English rather than in Igbo for several reasons. One is practical: there are far more readers of English than there are readers of Igbo. Another is that English enables Achebe to reach a world community with his messages. A third is that, by using English, Achebe uses the very language that others have employed to portray Africa in racist terms, resulting in a sort of poetic justice. However, Achebe is strongly committed to portraying Igbo culture accurately and powerfully, so he uses several Igbo words and phrases within *Things Fall Apart*, until those words and phrases no longer need to be defined. After reading the novel, for instance, a reader is much more familiar with terms and concepts like *chi*, *egwugwu*, and *ogbanje* than before reading the novel. Also, the novel preserves several Igbo tales and proverbs throughout, such as the tale of the tortoise in chapter eleven. All of this helps to bridge the cultural divide between the Igbo and Western readers, revealing an African culture to readers who in all likelihood know little, if anything, about African tribes, apart from stereotypes in movies, print, and television.

**Okonkwo as Tragic Hero in *Things Fall Apart***

Okonkwo serves as an excellent example of a *tragic hero*. A tragic hero is a character who is superior to those around him and is seen as an icon of his society, yet he possesses a fatal flaw that ultimately leads to his own demise. Okonkwo is a hard worker almost from birth, struggling against the memory of his own lazy father, Unoku. He is a champion wrestler of Umuofia, and
indeed is legendary for his wrestling abilities. He has killed five men in tribal wars, and he has created a great farm and great wealth for himself and his family. Above all, he is an *egwugwu*, a "masquerader" of one of the ancestral spirits of his people, and he owns two tribal titles at a young age. From the very beginning, the omniscient narrator of the novel tells us that Okonkwo is one of the most important men of his village, and indeed of his tribe.

At the same time, we see Okonkwo's personal flaw appear in chapter two: his fear of weakness. His father Unoku was a musician who hated war and disliked work, and Okonkwo seems to excel at these things in part to spite the memory of his father. But this fear goes beyond an aversion to laziness. Okonkwo also hates gentleness, which he sees as womanly and weak. He beats his son Nwoye when the young boy cannot work as hard as Okonkwo can. He also nags his wives, who do not dare to rebel against him for fear of punishment.

Okonkwo's inability to show gentle emotion is hard put to the test by Ikemefuna, the young boy whom Umuofia takes "hostage" as part of an agreement not to go to war with another neighboring tribe. This young boy pleases his foster father through his hard work and is even allowed to carry Okonkwo's stool and bag, a sign of respect from the forbidding Okonkwo. By chapter seven, we see how close Ikemefuna and Nwoye have become, and even how Okonkwo is beginning to relent in his harsh attitude toward the two boys. However, the Oracle's news that Ikemefuna must be killed weighs heavily on Okonkwo, and his participation in Ikemefuna's death is one of the more harrowing episodes in the novel. Okonkwo's fear of weakness and of being perceived as weak or "womanly" leads him to give his foster son the death blow with his machete, even though an elder of the village, Ogbuefi Ezeudu, tells Okonkwo not to participate: "That boy calls you father" (page 57). The narrator is quite specific as to why Okonkwo kills
Ikemefuna: "Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him [Ikemefuna] down. He was afraid of being thought weak" (page 61).

By ignoring Ogbuefi Ezeudu's advice, Okonkwo initiates a pattern of bad judgment and worse luck that will follow him throughout the rest of the novel. Obierika, Okonkwo's close friend, does not approve of his participation in Ikemefuna's death and warns that the Earth goddess will not be pleased. Soon afterward, Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma, who is the only woman toward whom he shows kindness and affection, grows deathly ill and is later taken away by the priestess Chielo, despite Okonkwo's attempts to keep her at his home. In chapter thirteen, at the funeral of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, Okonkwo's old rifle accidentally explodes, killing Ezeudu's son. Such an accidental death is ruled as a "female" or inadvertent crime, and so Okonkwo is exiled for seven years rather than killed. Such a punishment is almost worse than death for Okonkwo because of the association with a female crime and the loss of years in which he could have built up titles and remained a powerful leader for his village. He ignores his uncle Uchendu's advice to be thankful that he is not dead and still possesses wealth and a large family. He even loses his son Nwoye to the Christian missionaries, who in Okonkwo's mind are weak fools. In the end, his rage finds a focus: he slays a court messenger after the British administrationpunishes him and other men for destroying the church in his village. Eventually, he turns his anger and violence on himself, hanging himself in an act of ultimate humiliation.

Igbo Society and Western Intrusion in Things Fall Apart

For most Western readers, the Igbo people may at first seem barbaric or uncivilized. They are quite superstitious from a Western perspective, believing in such supernatural creatures as ogbanje, for example. Some of their social practices seem extraordinarily cruel as well,
particularly the abandonment of twins at birth and the mutilation of infant corpses thought to be *ogbanje*. However, behind such practices lies a society which, while quite different from European cultures, is nevertheless sophisticated and complex.

Any reader of *Things Fall Apart* is struck by the complexity of rituals in Igbo society. Consider the wedding ceremonies, for example, or the trials at which the *egwugwu* preside over legal disputes. The preparation of food is also quite important, and specific foods have specific values. Yams are the most difficult crop to harvest and therefore are considered manly (the king crop), while cassava and beans are easier to harvest and thus less worthy than yams. Yams are the centerpiece of important feasts, furthering their cultural significance. Greetings between hosts and visitors center around the breaking of a kola nut, revealing the hospitality of the Igbo.

The religion of the Igbo, while considered heathenish by such characters as the inflexible missionary Mr. Smith, is also extraordinary for its complexity. Consider the conversation in chapter twenty-one between Mr. Brown, the first Christian missionary, and one of Umuofia's leaders, Akunna. Akunna claims that the Igbo do believe in one all-mighty God, and have given Him the name Chukwu. Mr. Brown objects, however, to the Igbo practice of polytheism (the belief in more than one deity) and points to an idol carved of wood hanging from Akunna's rafter. But Akunna explains patiently that the Igbo do not wish to disturb Chukwu out of respect for His power and greatness, so they approach Him through subordinate gods, as a man would approach a powerful landlord through his servants. Such a religious concept could not come from ignorant, barbaric people.

What is perhaps most noteworthy is the idea that every man in Igbo society has an equal chance to rise within that society and gain success through his own efforts. While Okonkwo's father
Unoka was widely regarded as lazy and weak, the people of Umuofia do not regard Okonkwo in the same fashion. As the narrator tells us in chapter one, "among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father" (page 8). In Igbo society, worth is based on individual accomplishment and hard work, not on class systems or connections with powerful figures. Okonkwo achieved his powerful status in Umuofia because of his relentless work on his farm.

The European characters in this work, such as Mr. Smith and the District Commissioner, ignore much of the complexity and richness of Igbo society. Although Mr. Brown respects the Igbo ways and merely preaches his faith, while derailing attempts to confront Igbo ways directly, Mr. Smith believes that such an attitude is weak and damaging to the Christian church. The District Commissioner is even harsher in his attitudes toward the Igbo, whom he sees as primitive and uncivilized, and he is somewhat amused at Okonkwo's death and at the reactions of Obierika and the other people of Umuofia who cannot, according to tribal custom, take down Okonkwo's body from the tree and bury it. The novel ends with the title of the District Commissioner's forthcoming book, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, a title that sums up the basic attitudes of Europeans in Africa: native Africans are primitives who must be pacified and colonized, brought into civilization, and saved from what Achebe described as "one long night of savagery."