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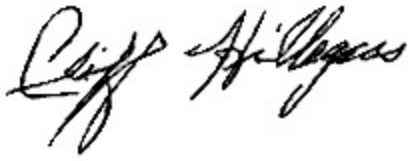

Things Fall Apart

Notes

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including
Life and Background
A Brief History of Nigeria
Introduction to the Novel
List of Characters
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Map
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Critical Essays Themes Language The Sequel to *Things Fall Apart*
Review Questions and Essay Topics
Selected Bibliography

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Life and 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 such novels as *Things Fall Apart*, have introduced readers throughout the world to creative uses of language and form, as well as to factual "insider" accounts of modern African life and history. Not only through Achebe's literary contributions, but also through his championing of bold objectives for Nigeria and Africa has he helped reshape our comprehension of African history, culture, and place in world affairs.

This 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. It has been translated into at least forty-five languages and has sold several million copies. The book won a major literary prize for Achebe the year after it was published.

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 was Igbo for

the first two years. At about eight, he began learning English. This relatively late introduction to English allowed Achebe to develop a sense of cultural pride and an appreciation of his native tongue, which might not have been cultivated had he been raised and taught exclusively in English. His home fostered his understanding of both cultures; on the one hand, he read books in English in his father's library, and, on the other hand, 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 graduation at eighteen, was accepted to study medicine at the new University College at Ibadan, a member college of London University at that 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 can be 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 these student writings,

only a few are significantly relative to his more mature works. Such short stories as "Marriage is a Private Affair" and "Dead Man's Path" explore the conflicts which arise when Western culture meets African society.

Career. After graduating with a B.A. 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, that eastern part of Nigeria declared independence as the nation of Biafra. This incident triggered thirty months of civil war which 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 being 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), plus *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 with his basic views expressed 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 his short stories and three collections of his 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: *Things Fall Apart* won for him the Margaret Wong Memorial Prize in 1959. 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.

A Brief History of Nigeria

The history of Nigeria is bound up with its geography. About one-third larger than the state of Texas, Nigeria is located just above the inner curve of the "elbow" on the west coast of Africa, just north of the equator, and just south of the Sahara Desert. More than two

hundred ethnic groups live in present-day Nigeria, each with its own language, beliefs, and culture. The largest ethnic groups are the mostly Protestant Yoruba in the west, the Catholic Igbo in the east, and the predominantly Muslim Hausa-Fulani in the north. This diversity of peoples is the result of thousands of years of history, as refugees from climatic changes, invaders, traders, and nomads came to settle with the indigenous population, and as foreign nations became aware of the area's resources.

Archaeological evidence indicates that human life in the area dates back at least ten thousand years. When conditions in the Sahara to the north became unbearable between 5000 B.C. and 2000

B.C., many of the Sahara's inhabitants migrated into what is now northern Nigeria. The earliest inhabitants of the area were hunters and gatherers, but by 2000 B.C., most seem to have settled into agricultural communities. By the ninth century A.D., the people of the savannahthe broad grassland with scattered trees in the northern part of the areaorganized themselves into states. They were extremely successful trading in salt, slaves, ivory, metal, and weapons on the African continent. By the fifteenth century, the religion of Islam had been established in most northern communities, probably introduced by Muslim gold traders from the Middle East.

Also in the fifteenth century, the Portuguese arrived on the west coast of Africa and specifically in the river areas west of the Niger delta. They began to trade with some Nigerian groups for slaves as well as spices. Inland from the coast, the Aroa priestly class who managed a famous oraclecontrolled the trade in slaves. Aro priests and traders arranged for the sale of slaves to the Benin ethnic group (Benin is now an independent nation west of Nigeria), who in turn sold them to the West.

The events in *Things Fall Apart* take place at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early part of the twentieth century. Although the British did not occupy most of Nigeria until 1904, they had had a strong presence in West Africa since the early nineteenth century. The British were a major buyer of African slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In 1807, however, the British outlawed the slave trade within their empire. At that time, they did not yet control Nigeria, and internal wars continually increased the available supply of captured slaves.

In 1861, frustrated with the expanding slave trade, the British decided to occupy Lagos, a major slave-trading post and capital of present-day Nigeria. Slowly and hesitantly, the British occupied the rest of Nigeria.

Ultimately, it was more than the slave trade which prompted the British to occupy Nigeria. The British were in competition with other Europeans for control of the natural wealth of West Africa. At the Berlin Conference of 188485a meeting arranged to settle rivalries among European powersthe British proclaimed Nigeria to be their territory. They bought palm oil, peanuts, rubber, cotton, and other agricultural products from the Nigerians. Indeed, trade in these products made some Nigerian traders very wealthy. In the

early twentieth century, the British defined the collection of diverse ethnic groups as one country, Nigeria, and declared it a colony of the British Empire.

The British moved into Nigeria with a combination of government control, religious mission, and economic incentive. In the north, the British ruled indirectly, with the support of the local Muslim leaders, who collected taxes and administered a government on behalf of the British. In the south, however, where communities (such as Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart*) were often not under one central authority, the British had to intervene directly and forcefully to control the local population.

For example, a real-life tragedy at the community of Ahiara serves as the historical model for the massacre of the village of Abame in Chapter Fifteen of *Things Fall Apart*. On November 16, 1905, a white man rode his bicycle into Ahiara and was killed by the natives. A month later, an expedition of British forces searched the villages in the area and killed many natives in reprisal.

The Ahiara incident led to the Bende-Onitsha Hinterland Expedition, a force created to eliminate Igbo opposition. The British destroyed the powerful Awka Oracle and killed all opposing Igbo groups. In 1912, the British instituted the Collective Punishment Ordinance which stipulated punishment against an entire village or community for crimes committed by one or more persons against the white colonialists.

The British had an efficient administrative system and introduced a form of British culture to Nigeria. They also sent many capable young Nigerians to England for education. The experience of Nigerians who lived overseas in the years preceding, during, and

after World War II gave rise to a class of young, educated nationalists who agitated for independence from Great Britain. The British agreed to the Nigerians' demands and, in 1947, instituted a ten-year economic plan toward independence. Nigeria became an independent country on October 1, 1960, and became a republic in 1963.

Throughout most of the 1950s and early 1960s, the Nigerian economy grew steadily. However, mounting conflict among different ethnic groups led the country to a civil war from 1967 to 1970, slowing the economy considerably. In the 1970s, with the defeat of the split-away Republic of Biafra and strong demand for Nigerian oil, the economy once again grew rapidly. Africa's most populous

country (over 100,000,000 people at the time), Nigeria aspired to become the continent's leading nation. With oil exports earning as much as $60 million a day during the 1970s and 1980s, Nigeria helped finance the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa and peace-keeping forces in war-torn Liberia. But lower oil prices in recent years have destabilized the Nigerian economy, and, with economic problems, political corruption has swollen.

With the British long gone from Nigeria, corruption and a lack of leadership continued to hamper Nigeria's quest for true democracy. A series of military coups and dictatorships in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s replaced the fragile democracy Nigeria enjoyed in the early 1960s. In 1993, Nigeria held a democratic presidential election, which was followed by yet another bloodless coup. And so continues the political pattern for this troubled, violent, most populous country in Africa.

Introduction to the Novel

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is probably the most authentic narrative ever written about life in Nigeria at the turn of this century. Although the novel was first published in 1958two years before Nigeria achieved its independencethousands of copies of it 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 this novel as a textbook in many types of classesfrom 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 poemironically a product of European thoughtYeats is describing 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 system of government. In "The Second Coming," Yeats invokes the anti-Christ leading an anarchic world to destruction. This ominous tone gradually emerges in *Things Fall Apart* as we watch an intrusive religious presence and an insensitive government together cause the Umuofian world as it has existed to "fall apart."

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. For him, unless Africans could tell their side of their story, the African experience would be forever "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. For Achebe, this reductionist portrayal of Africa is racist. Achebe points out this shortcoming to Conrad, who wrote against imperialism, yet 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 had his own Nigerian people in mind 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 pastwith all its imperfectionswas not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.

In this novel, the Europeans' understanding of Africa is particu-

larly exemplified in two characters: the Reverend James Smith, the missionary, 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. And the District Commissioner 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 Western inclination toward simplification and essentialization of African culture.

To counter that inclination, in *Things Fall Apart* 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, it is Achebe's white colonialists who are stereotypedrigid, most with imperialistic intentionswhile 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 Conrad, Orwell, Melville, and 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. For Achebe, this notion is an unacceptable argument as well as a myth. The Igbos were not "noble savages." While the colonialists eventually destroyed the Igbo world, the indigenous culture was never an idyllic haven, even before the arrival of the whites. Negative as well as positive elements of Igbo culture are depicted. Achebe is sometimes as critical of his own people as he is of the colonizers.

The African diasporathe dispersal of black Africans as slaves throughout the Westput blacks in North and South America, Europe, and the Caribbean. The same adversity also created an intercontinental connection among black writers, who shared an extraordinary racially-based identity.

Achebe has been a major force in this worldwide literary movement defining and describing this African experience. Other post-colonial writers in this movement include Leopold Senghor, Wole Soyinka, Aimé Césaire, Derek Walcott, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Birago Diop. These writers not only confront us with a multi-ethnic perspective of history and truth, but also challenge us to reexamine ourselves 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 groundbreaking work. Achebe's role in making modern African literature a part of world literature cannot be understated.

A Final Note: Throughout this novel, Achebe uses the spelling "Ibo"; be aware that this is the *old* spelling. Throughout the Notes, as well as on the map, we have used the contemporary, current spelling: "Igbo."

List of Characters

Okonkwo (Oh-*kawn*-kwoh)
The central character of *Things Fall Apart*. A leader of the African Igbo community of Umuofia (Oo-moo-*oh*-fee-ah), known as a fierce warrior as well as a successful farmer, although he is a man

still in his thirties. He has three wives and several children who live in their homes in his village compound. He is determined to overcome the stigma left by his father's laziness and wastefulness.

Unoka (Ooh-*no*-kah)
Okonkwo's father, known for his weakness and lack of responsibility.

Nwoye (Nuh-*woh*-yeh)
Okonkwo's oldest son, age twelve at the book's beginning. By nature, he is a sensitive young man.

Ikemefuna (Ee-keh-*meh*-foo-nah)
A boy of fourteen when he is given to Umuofia by a neighboring village to avoid war, he is a clever, resourceful young man.

Ekwefi (Eh-*kweh*-fee)
Okonkwo's second wife; mother of Ezinma, her only living child.

Ezinma (Eh-*zeen*-mah)
Daughter of Ekwefi and Okonkwo; Ekwefi's only surviving child.

Ojiubo (Oh-jee-*ooh*-boh)
Okonkwo's third wife and mother of several of Okonkwo's children.

Obierika (Oh-bee-*air*-ee-kah)
Okonkwo's best friend in Umuofia. He often represents the voice of reason. He is the father of Maduka (son) and Ekueke (daughter).

Chielo (*Chee*-eh-loh)
A village widow who is also the priestess of Agbala.

Agbala (*Ahg*-bah-lah)
The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, she influences all aspects of Umuofian life (based on the real Oracle at Awka, who controlled Igbo life for centuries).

Mr. Brown
The first white Christian missionary in Umuofia and Mbanta; an understanding and accommodating man, he is inclined to listen to the Igbos.

Mr. Kiaga (Kee-*ah*-gah)
The native interpreter for the missionaries, he is a teacher and a leader of the new church in Mbanta.

The Reverend James Smith
A strict, stereotypical white Christian missionary, he takes over the church after Mr. Brown's departure.

The District Commissioner
A stern, stereotypical white colonial administrator of Umuofia, he follows regulations to the letter and has little knowledge or understanding of the people for whom he tries to administer a new government.

Summaries & Critical Commentaries

Part One

Chapter One

Summary

Set roughly around the turn of the century, the novel focuses first on the "hero" of the book, Okonkwo, and on his late father, Unoka. Okonkwo is a respected leader within the Ibo (the contemporary spelling is "Igbo") community of Umuofia in eastern Nigeria. About twenty years ago, Okonkwo distinguished himself and brought honor to his village when he wrestled and threw Amalinze the Cat to the ground, a man who had not been defeated for seven years. Since then, Okonkwo's reputation as a wrestler has grown throughout the nine villages of Umuofia. He is known to be quick to anger, especially when dealing with unsuccessful menmen who remind him of his father, Unoka, who died ten years ago deeply in debt.

Because of Unoka's laziness and wastefulness, the community had considered him a failure and laughing stock; he was a continual source of deep shame to Okonkwo. Even though he had a family to care for, Unoka frequently borrowed money, then squandered it on palm-wine and merrymaking with his neighbors, neglecting his family who barely had enough to eat.

The story is told about the day, years ago, when Unoka was visited by Okoye, a successful neighbor. After the traditional ceremonial courtesies and small talk, Okoye asked Unoka for the two hundred cowries Unoka had borrowed two years earlier. Okoye

needed the money for the ceremony in which he would take the third highest title of honor.

Unoka burst into laughter and pointed to the wall on which he had recorded his debts. He told Okoye that tradition required him to repay his largest debts before repaying small ones like his debt to Okoye. Okoye left without his money.

At present, despite his father's shameful reputation, Okonkwo is highly respected in Umuofia, which honors individual achievement. And Okonkwo has achieved much. Still a young man in his thirties, he has become a wealthy farmer of yamsa sacred and "manly" cropand has three wives, a significant indicator of "manliness." Furthermore, he is known for his incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars, and he has taken two honorific titles, while his father died with none.

Because Okonkwo is honored as one of the greatest men in his community, he will be asked to look after a young man who will be given as an "offering" to Umuofia by the neighboring village of Mbaino in hopes of avoiding war with Umuofia.

Commentary

Although not indicated in this chapter, the events of *Things Fall Apart* take place in the late 1800s and early 1900s, just prior to and during the early days of the British Empire's expansion in Nigeria. Throughout the book, we learn details about life in that place and period in an African culture and tradition much different from our own. For example, in this chapter we begin to learn about:

legends and traditions (the fight with a spirit of the wild by the founder of their village),

symbols of honor (titlessee more detail below),

indicators of wealth (yams, cowries),

marriage customs (more than one wife),

the reckoning of time (markets, a week of four days),

social rituals (kola nuts, alligator pepper, chalk, small talk, proverbs),

and a little about music, entertainment, food, and drink. In his goal to demonstrate the complexity and sophistication of Igbo society, Achebe gradually introduces such details when they are relevant to the story.

Chapter One reports Okonkwo's principal accomplishments

and, through them, establishes his important position in Igbo society. These details alone provide insight into his character and motivation. Essentially, Okonkwo exhibits qualities of manhood in Igbo society. In driving himself toward tribal success and recognition, he is trying to bury the unending shame he feels about the faults and failures of his late father, Unoka.

Familiar with Western literature and its traditional forms, Achebe structures *Things Fall Apart* in the tradition of a Greek tragedy, with the story centered around Okonkwo, a tragic hero. Aristotle defined the tragic hero as a character who is superior and noble, one who has demonstrated great courage and perseverance, but who is undone because of a tragic personal flaw in his character.

In this first chapter, Achebe sets up Okonkwo as a man much respected for his considerable achievements and noble virtues, key qualities of a tragic hero. In the chapters ahead, the reader should be alert to qualities and actions that begin to reveal the tragic flaw in Okonkwo's otherwise admirable actions, words, ideas, and relationships with others.

Most of the novel is told by an omniscient narrator, one who is sympathetic to the Igbo society and who can report thoughts and feelings of all the characters. For example, the narrator tells us

how members of Okonkwo's family could hear him breathe heavily in his sleep,

what Unoka remembered and thought about, and

how Okonkwo feels about his father.

At the end of Chapter One, Achebe foreshadows both the presence

of Ikemefuna in Okonkwo's household and the teenage boy's ultimate fate, referring to him as a "doomed" and "ill-fated lad."

One of the most significant social markers of Igbo society is introduced in this chapterits unique system of honorific titles. Throughout the book, titles are reference points by which members of Igbo society frequently compare themselves with one another (especially Okonkwo). These are not titles conferred by higher authorities, but are arranged for by the individual who has the means to *pay* for them. As a man accumulates wealth, he may gain additional recognition and prestige by "taking a title." He may also do this for male members of his family, as we shall see later. In the process of taking a title, the man pays significant initiation fees that are shared by those already holding the title.

In Umuofia, there are four such titles, each apparently more expensive than its predecessor. A man with sufficient money to pay the fee begins with the first levelthe most common title. Many cannot go beyond the first title. Each title taken may be shown by such physical signs as an anklet or as marks on the feet or the face, so that others can see who can claim which titles.

The initiation fees are so large that some writers have referred to the system as a means for "redistributing wealth." Some Native American tribes of the Pacific Northwest observe their own version of "redistributing wealth" through a "potlatch" ceremony at which the guests receive gifts from the person gaining the honor as a show of wealth for others to exceed.

(Here and for each of the following chapters, difficult allusions, words, and phrases are explained.)

gyre The word appears in the book's opening quotation from a W. B. Yeats poem, "The Second Coming," and means a turning, or spiral spin.

Okonkwo The name implies male pride and stubbornness.

Umuofia The community name means both "children of the forest" and "a land undisturbed by European influences."

harmattan a dust storm, or a sudden, dry wind from the Sahara.

Unoka Okonkwo's father's name; it can be translated as "home is supreme," implying a tendency to stay home and be lazy instead of achieving fame and heroism in the life of the nine-village community.

cowries shells about half an inch long, shaped like small clam

shells, but glossy with toothlike ridges along the edges where they open; they are collected on strings and used as a form of money in parts of Asia and Africa.

egwugwu revered secret members of the nine villages who wear masks during certain rituals and speak on behalf of the spirits; *egwugwu* can be either singular or plural.

markets Igbo weeks are four days long, the market day being on the first of each week; therefore, "three or four markets" is a period of twelve to sixteen days.

kites birds of prey in the hawk family.

Okoye an "everyman" name comparable to "John Doe" in English. Here, Okoye seems to represent all the people to whom Unoka owes money.

kola nut a caffeine-rich seed pod of a native African shrub or tree; it represents vitality and is used as a courteous, welcoming snack, often with alligator pepper.

alligator pepper (*offe*) a small brown fruit of an African shrub, whose hot seeds are like black pepper and may be ground and blended with kola nut in the ritual welcome of visitors.

chalk represents peace; used by visitors to signify personal honors and status on the floor and on the toe or face, according to the level of honorific titles they have taken. For example, Okoye marks his toe, indicative of his first title.

Mbaino This community name means "four settlements."

ekwe a drum.

udu a clay pot.

ogene a gong.

Ibo Today, the word is spelled "Igbo" (the "g" is not pronounced); one of the major native groups of southeastern Nigeria, its people are known both for their art and for their skills as traders.

Idemili title A man is honored by the titles he has taken in special ceremonies; the Idemili title, named after the river god Idemili, is the third-level title.

Chapter Two

Summary

One night, as Okonkwo is settling on his bed, he hears the beat of a drum and the voice of the town crier. The messenger calls every man in Umuofia to gather at the marketplace the next morning. Okonkwo wonders if the emergency concerns war with a neighboring clan. War does not frighten Okonkwo as he knows it frightened his cowardly father. In Umuofia's most recent war, for example, Okonkwo brought home his fifth human head.

The next morning, Okonkwo joins "ten thousand men" in the marketplace, waiting to hear the important message. A powerful

orator shouts a welcome to them, greeting them in all four directions, punching his clenched fist into the air; the assembled men shout in response. After silence returns, he angrily tells the crowd that a Umuofian woman has been killed in Mbaino while she was attending its market. The outraged crowd finally agrees Umuofia should follow its usual course of action: Give Mbaino a choice of either going to war with Umuofia or offering Umuofia a young man and a young virgin as compensation for the death of the Umuofian woman.

The power and war-medicine magic of Umuofia is feared by its neighbors, who know that Umuofia would not go to war without first trying to negotiate a peaceful settlement and without the acceptance of war by its Oracle. Everyone knows that a war now would be a "just war." Okonkwo is sent as the emissary of Umuofia to negotiate with Mbaino, and he returns two days later with a young man and a virgin offered by Mbaino.

The elders of Umuofia decide that the girl should live with the man whose wife was killed, while the young man, named Ikemefuna, belongs to the clan as a whole. They ask Okonkwo to take fourteen-year-old Ikemefuna into his home while the clan decides what to do with him. Okonkwo gives the care of Ikemefuna to his senior wife, mother of Nwoye, his oldest son, who is twelve. Ikemefuna is quite frightened, especially because he doesn't understand what has happened or why he is here, separated from his family. As it turns out, the teenage boy will live in Okonkwo's household for three years.

Because Okonkwo is so continually afraid that someone might think him weak, he rules his household with a stern hand and a

fierce voice, causing everyone to fear his explosive temper. When he was a child, a playmate called his father *agbala*, meaning "woman" and also "a man who has taken no title." Okonkwo learned to hate everything his father loved, including gentleness as well as idleness. He sees signs of laziness in his son Nwoye. To purge himself of this reminder of his father, Okonkwo nags and beats Nwoye daily.

In his family compound, Okonkwo lives in a hut of his own, and each of his three wives lives in a hut of her own with her children. The prosperous compound also includes an enclosure with stacks of yams, sheds for goats and hens, and a "medicine house," where Okonkwo keeps the symbols of his personal god and ancestral spirits and where he offers prayers for himself and his family. He works

long hours on his farms and expects others to do the same. Although they don't have his strength, they suffer without complaint.

Commentary

In Chapter Two, we begin to see beliefs and practices of the Igbo tradition that will be particularly significant in this storyfor example, the wide division between what actions and responsibilities are considered manly and what actions and responsibilities are considered womanly. Respect and success are based on only manly activities and accomplishments; taking care of children and hens, for example, are womanly activities.

In Okonkwo's determination to be a perfect example of manhood, he begins revealing to us the consequences of his fear of weakness, his tragic flaw. Because of his overriding fear of being thought womanly, Okonkwo:

hates not only idleness, but gentleness as well;

demands that his family work as long as he does, without regard to their lesser physical stamina;

nags and beats his oldest son, Nwoye.

Achebe continues weaving traditional elements of Igbo society into Chapter Two: The marketplace gathering illustrates the Igbo society's reverence for what is manlythat is, the male villagers' loyalty to each other, evident when they refer to the woman murdered by another village as "a daughter of Umuofia." This scene also illustrates the ceremonial nature of such town meetings, as the speaker shouts the customary greeting to the crowd while

turning in four different directions. In addition, we learn that Umuofian religious traditions include, for example, the worship of wooden objects representing not only one's personal god, but also the ancestral spirits to whom one prays and makes sacrifices.

Achebe continues to use the art of traditional storytelling and references to legends and sayings of the time to illustrate what people believe and respect. For example:

the memory from Okonkwo's childhood when his father was called a "woman";

the proverb "When the moon is shining, the cripple becomes hungry for a walk" represents a belief in the protective quality of moonlight in contrast with the fear of the darkness;

the legend of the old woman with one leg explains, in part, why the other clans fear Umuofia.

Ogbuefi a person with a high title, as in Ogbuefi Ezeugo (the orator) and Ogbuefi Udo (the man whose wife was killed in Mbaino). Ezeugo is the name for a person of high religious significance, such as a priest; "Udo" means peace.

about ten thousand men It seems unlikely that the nine villages of Umuofia would have as many as ten thousand men. This probably means "every man of the community"an example of hyperbole, an exaggeration not intended to be taken literally.

"Umuofia kwenu" "United Umuofia"a shout of approval and greeting.

agadi-nwayi an old woman.

oracle a prediction; a person or trusted body of knowledge and signs that seems to give predictions and advice; here, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves.

a just war Societies throughout history have rationalized certain wars as justified for religious or cultural reasons. For example, in the fifth century, St. Augustine of the early Christian church wrote extensively about the "just war"; the Crusades of the late Middle Ages were initiated as "holy wars"; and today's Muslim word *jihad* means "holy war."

emissary a representative on a mission, often a mission of peace.

ndichie elders.

compound a walled-in area enclosing several structures such as the

separate residences of Okonkwo and his wives, sheds for animals and storage, a shrine, and a barn (here, a walled, shaded enclosure with good air circulation).

obi a hut within a compound.

Chapter Three

Summary

This chapter describes incidents from Okonkwo's childhood and young adulthoodincidents that have contributed to Okonkwo's flawed character:

According to the first story from Okonkwo's past, his father,

Unoka, went to consult the Oracle in the cave on the hill, asking why he has had bad harvests each year in spite of his sacrifices and planting procedures. The priestess of the Oracle interrupted him angrily during his story, telling him he hadn't offended the gods, but in his laziness, he took the easy way out, planting on exhausted land, for example. She told him to go home and "work like a man."

Bad fortune followed Unoka, even to his death. He died of swelling in his stomach and limbsan affliction not acceptable to the earth goddess. He therefore could not be buried, but had to be left in the "evil forest" to die and rot, making Okonkwo even more ashamed of his father.

In the second story from Okonkwo's past, the young Okonkwo was preparing to plant his first farm in yamsa man's cropwhile his mother and sisters grew women's cropssuch things as coco-yams and cassava. Because Okonkwo had received nothing from his father, he had to begin his farming through share-cropping. To get help for his planting, he visited Nwakibie, a great man of the village, as symbolized by his three barns, nine wives, and thirty children. After the proper greetings and rituals, Okonkwo asked Nwakibie for seed-yams, pledging his hard work in growing and harvesting them. According to the share-cropping contract, Okonkwo would return two-thirds of what he grew to Nwakibie, receiving only a third of the total crop for himself, his parents, and his sisters. Nwakibie had already turned down similar requests from other young men. But he acknowledged Okonkwo's earnestness and ambition and gave Okonkwo twice the number of seed-yams he'd hoped for.

The growing season that followed was disastrous for Okonkwo as

well as for most other farmers of the village. First, the land suffered a great drought, then unending rain and floodsa combination ruinous to the season's harvest. Okonkwo was deeply discouraged, but he knew he would survive because of his determination to be successful.

Commentary

Achebe's use of story-telling flashbacks illustrates further how Okonkwo's resentment of his father grew, as well as how his own determination to succeed was testedthe two sides of his characterization as tragic hero.

The separation between the man's world and the woman's

world in Umuofian culture is again emphasized in this chapterfirst, in the roles of the women in the ritual wine-drinking, and later, in the classification of crops: coco-yams, beans, and cassava being "women's crops" while the yam is identified as the "king of crops" and a "man's crop."

This chapter illustrates several traditional ideas and truths that shape day-to-day Igbo life. These proverbs are often expressed in indirect language and symbols:

A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing.

An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb.

The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did.

Since men have learned to shoot without missing, [Eneke the bird] has learned to fly without perching.

You can tell a ripe corn by its look.

Such traditional expressions illustrate the great respect and courtesy these people show to one another, by allowing the speaker to use veiled language when making comments about himself (Okonkwo in the lizard example, and Nwakibie in the Eneke example), about others (Ogbuefi Idigo talking about Obiako in the toad example), or about the person he is addressing (Nwakibie speaking to Okonkwo in the corn example), and to commenteven to oneselfon life in general (Okonkwo in the old woman example). This symbolic language represents a high level of cultural sensitivity and sophistication.

An especially significant concept introduced in this chapter is the belief in personal *chi.* At its simplest level, we might parallel *chi* to the Western idea of "soul," although *chi* is a more complex idea. The Igbo believe that each individual is given a *chi* by the Creator (Chukwu) at the moment of conception, and the individual's fate and abilities for the coming life are assigned to the *chi.* Before each reincarnation, the individual bargains for improved circumstances in the next life. The *chi* thus becomes one's personal god and, as such, the *chi* guides one to fulfill the expected destiny. On the one hand, the individual is ruled by his *chi*, but on the other hand, only the individual can make the most of what has been planned through the *chi.*

Notice that Achebe's first name begins with *chi: Chinua*. Achebe

once said, "When we talk about *chi*, we're talking about the individual spirit, and so you find the word in all kinds of combinations. Chinwe, which is my wife's name, means '*Chi* owns me'; mine is Chinua, which is a shortened form of an expression that means 'May a *chi* fight for me.' My son is named Chidi, which means '*Chi* is there.' So it's almost in everybody's name in one form or the other. Our youngest girl asked me why she didn't have *chi* in her name. She thought it was some kind of discrimination, so she took the name Chioma, which means 'Good *chi*.'"

Agbala, the Oracle the prophet of the Igbo. Achebe bases the Agbala Oracle (the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves) on the Awka Oracle that was destroyed by the British. Chika was the priestess who spoke to Unoka on behalf of the god Agbala.

Ani the earth goddess who owns all land.

chi a significant cultural concept and belief, meaning one's personal deity; also one's destiny or fate.

"Nna-ayi" "Our father"; a greeting of respect.

share-cropping an arrangement by which a farmer pays for his tenancy on the farm, or for his plants and other necessities (such as Okonkwo does for his seed-yams), by harvesting only a share of the crop for himself, the rest belonging to the owner of the farm or the lender of the planting materials.

coco-yam the edible, spherical-shaped tuber of the taro plant grown in the tropics and eaten like potatoes, or ground into flour, cooked to a paste, or fermented for beer. The round coco-yam (which is a woman's crop) is a different tuber than the elongated-shaped yam (which is a man's crop).

cassava the manioc plant, another "woman's crop." Cassava provides valuable leaves for livestock feed as well as tubers which can be prepared like coco-yams. Its roots provide the starch for tapioca.

Chapter Four

Summary

In spite of Okonkwo's beginnings in poverty and misfortune, he has risen to become one of the most respected elders of the clan. Yet others remark on how harshly he deals with men less successful

than himself. For example, at a meeting to discuss the next ancestral feast, Osugoa man without titlescontradicts Okonkwo, who in turn insults Osugo by declaring the meeting is "for men," bringing attention to Osugo's lack of titles. When others at the meeting side with Osugo, Okonkwo apologizes.

Okonkwo's hard-earned success is well deserved, which is why the clan chose Okonkwo to carry the war ultimatum to their enemy, why the enemy treats him with such respect in the negotiations, and why the elders select Okonkwo to care for Ikemefuna until they decide what to do with him. Once the young man is entrusted to Okonkwo's care, he is forgotten by the rest of the clan for three years.

At first, Ikemefuna was very unhappyhe missed his mother and sister, he tried to run away, and he wouldn't eat. Okonkwo threatened to beat him, so Ikemefuna finally ate, but then vomited and became ill for twelve days. As he recovered, he seemed to lose his fear and sadness.

Ikemefuna has become very popular in Okonkwo's house, especially with Nwoye and the other children. To them, he seems to know everything and is able to make useful things like flutes, rodent traps, and bows. Even Okonkwo inwardly has become fond of him, but does not show affection, which he considers a womanly sign of weakness. He treats Ikemefuna with a heavy hand, as he does other members of his family, although he does allow Ikemefuna to accompany him like a son to meetings and feasts, carrying his stool and his bag. Ikemefuna calls Okonkwo "father."

During the annual Week of Peace just before planting time, tradition permits no one in the village to speak a harsh word to

another person. One day during this week, Okonkwo's youngest wife, Ojiugo, goes to braid her hair at a friend's house, forgetting to prepare the afternoon meal or feed her children. When she returns, Okonkwo beats her severely, thereby violating this Week of Peace. Even when he is reminded of the ban on violence, he doesn't stop the beating. Because Okonkwo's violation of peace could jeopardize the whole village's crops, the priest of the earth goddess orders Okonkwo to make offerings at his shrine. Although Okonkwo inwardly regrets his "great evil," he never admits to an error. His offensive breaking of the peace and the priest's mild punishment are talked about in the village.

After the sacred week, the farmers of the village begin to plant

their harvest. Okonkwo allows Ikemefuna and Nwoye to help him collect, count, and prepare the seed-yams for planting, although he continually finds fault with their efforts. He believes he is simply helping them learn the difficult and manly art of seed-yam preparation.

Soon, the rainy season begins and the planting takes place, followed by the intense period of care for the young plants. During the resting time between planting and harvest, the friendship between Ikemefuna and Nwoye grows even stronger.

Commentary

Okonkwo believes that, even for slight annoyances, his manliness demands that he beat members of his familyNwoye, Ikemefuna, and Ojiugoand that he ridicule men who remind him of his father. He may inwardly experience emotions of affection and regret, but he cannot show those emotions to others, and so he isolates himself through extreme actions.

Two more examples of traditional wisdom are used in talking about Okonkwo:

"Those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble." This is later contradicted: Okonkwo had "cracked them himself."

"When a man says yes, his *chi* says yes also." This is an ambiguous statement, as *chi* itself is ambiguous, apparently meaning that a man is being guided by his *chi* while at the same time his actions affect his destiny as set in his *chi.* (Review the discussion of *chi* in the Commentary for Chapter Three.)

The very end of the chapter refers to Ikemefuna's favorite story about "the ant [who] holds his court in splendor and the sands dance forever." Watch for this story to reappear under tragic circumstances.

Osugo The name means a "low-ranked person."

Week of Peace a sacred week in Umuofia, during which no violence is allowed.

nza a small but aggressive bird.

nso-ani a sin against the earth goddess Ani.

Amadiora the god of thunder and lightning.

Chapter Five

Summary

The village of Umuofia prepares for the Feast of the New Yam, which takes place just before the harvest. All yams left over from the old year must be disposed of and everything used in preparing, cooking, and serving yams must be thoroughly washed before being used for the new crop. Relatives and other guests are invited from far and wide for the feast; Okonkwo invites his wives' relatives. While everyone else seems enthusiastic about the coming festival, Okonkwo knows he will grow tired of being at the festival for days; he would rather tend to his farm.

Near the end of the preparations, Okonkwo's suppressed anger and resentment about the feast explodes when he thinks someone has killed one of his banana trees. In fact, though, the tree has merely had leaves cut from it to wrap food. When his second wife, Ekwefi, admits to taking the leaves, Okonkwo beats her severely to release his pent-up anger. Then he sends for his rusty gun to go hunting even though he is not a hunter or skilled with a gun. When Ekwefi mumbles about "guns that never shot," he grabs his gun, aims it at her, and pulls the trigger. Although it goes off, she is not injured. He sighs and walks away with the gun.

Despite Okonkwo's outbursts, the festival is celebrated with great joy, even in his household and even by Ekwefi after her beating and near-shooting. Like most people of the village, she looks forward to the second day of the feast and its great wrestling matches between men of the village and men of neighboring villages. It was in a contest of this kind years earlier when Okonkwo not only won the wrestling match, but also won Ekwefi's

heart.

Okonkwo's wives and daughters excitedly prepare the yams for feasting in anticipation of the contest. As his evening meal is served by daughters of each of his wives, Okonkwo acknowledges to himself how especially fond he is of his daughter Ezinma. However, as if to offset his soft feelings, he scolds her twice while she sits waiting for him to eat.

Commentary

This chapter repeatedly illustrates Okonkwo's volatilityhis readiness to explode into violence at slight provocations. We see

how often his feelings differ from what he says or does. Although the people of the village respect him and his accomplishments, he does not quite fit in with his peers, some of whom disagree with his treatment of less successful men.

He does not even enjoy the leisurely ceremonial feasts as others do. His impatience with the festivities is so great that it erupts into a false accusation of one of his wives, followed by his beating her and his apparent attempt to shoot her. Okonkwo's need to express anger through violence is clearly a fatal flaw in his character. His stubborn and often irrational behavior is beginning to set him apart from the rest of the village in a negative way.

In contrast, we read about Okonkwo's feelings of love and affectionhis first encounter with Ekwefi years ago, and his fondness for his daughter Ezinma. But he hides such emotions as signs of weakness and betrayal of his manliness. We see further evidence of his violent nature when he moves his feet in response to the drums of the wrestling dance and trembles "with the desire to conquer and subdue . . . like the desire for a woman."

The amount of detail included about the Feast of the New Yam, just before the annual harvest, underscores how closely the life of the community is tied to the production of its food. The description of household preparations for the festival reveals two significant issues:

the roles of the community's women and their daughters in keeping the households running smoothly and in preparing for special occasions, even though they are not permitted to hold positions of leadership in the village; and

what little impact a wife-beating and near-shooting have on family life, as if violence is an acceptable part of day-to-day life in Okonkwo's household.

For the first time in the story, Achebe mentions guns. This Western technology arrived in the village before the Westerners actually did, an outgrowth of Igbo trade with the rest of the world; Umuofia was not a completely isolated community.

cam wood a dye from a West African redwood tree, used by women to redden their skins before decorating themselves with patterns for special occasions.

bride-price money paid to "purchase" a woman from another man. Although Okonkwo did not originally have the money for Ekwefi's bride-price, she ran away from her husband to be with Okonkwo.

Ezinma the name of Ekwefi and Okonkwo's daughter, meaning "true beauty"; she is also called Nma and Ezigbo, meaning "the good one (child)."

ilo the village gathering place and playing field; an area for large celebrations and special events.

making *inyanga* flaunting, or showing off.

Chapter Six

Summary

On the second day of the festival, everyone gathers at the village playing field to watch the wrestling contest between men of the village and men of a neighboring village. The first matches, between two teams of boys fifteen or sixteen years old, provide entertainment and excitement before the main events. One of the victorious boys is Maduka, the son of Okonkwo's good friend Obierika. Neighbors greet each other and tension builds until matches between the real wrestlers begin.

The current priestess of the Oracle, Chielo, talks casually with Ekwefi about Okonkwo's attack on her and about Ekwefi's daughter, Ezinma, of whom Chielo seems particularly fond.

As the drums thunder, two teams of twelve men challenge each other. Many expect the final match between the two greatest fighters in the villages to be uneventful because of the similar styles of the two wrestlers. However, the spectators are thrilled when the local fighter, Okafo, takes advantage of one of his opponent's moves and suddenly defeats him. The crowd carries the victorious Okafo on their shoulders with pride.

Commentary

The spectacle of the wrestling matches illustrates the value placed on physical agility and strength in the Igbo culture. In ways

similar to today's sports, the wrestling eventseven in their violenceprovide vicarious pleasure for the spectators who consider the victors heroes, often carrying them on their shoulders. Many years earlier, Okonkwo himself sparked his reputation as a powerful man by defeating an opponent who had wrestled undefeated for seven years.

This scene also displays the sense of community and kinship among members of the village, as in the brief exchange between Ekwefi and her neighbor Chielo, a widow who is the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle. Except for the marketplace and gatherings like the Feast of the New Yam, the women have little opportunity to visit other villagers who are not in their family.

The conversation between Ekwefi and Chielo includes several puzzling references to Ezinma (italics are added for emphasis):

> Chielo: "And how is *my daughter* Ezinma?"
>
> Ekwefi: "She has *been well* for some time now. Perhaps *she has come to stay*."
>
> Chielo: "*I think she has.* How old is she now?"
>
> Ekwefi: "She is about ten years old."
>
> Chielo: "*I think she will stay. They usually stay if they do not die before the age of six.*"
>
> Ekwefi: "*I pray she stays.*"

Watch for clarification of these references to Ezinma (Okonkwo's favorite daughter) in later chapters.

Chapter Seven

Summary

Nwoye and Ikemefuna have become like brothers, spending all their time together. In the evenings, they sit with Okonkwo in his hut listening to his manly stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye still enjoys his mother's folk tales and legends, but he tries to impress Okonkwo by being masculine and physical, pretending to dislike the women's stories and grumbling about women. Okonkwo is inwardly pleased at Nwoye's growing more tough and manly, crediting the change to Ikemefuna's good influence.

One day while Okonkwo and his sons are working on the walls of the compound, a great black cloud descends upon the town. The villagers are joyful as they recognize the coming of the locusts, a great delicacy in Umuofia. Everyone sets out to catch them for roasting, drying, and eating.

As Okonkwo, Nwoye, and Ikemefuna are happily eating the rare food, Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man of the village, calls to Okonkwo in order to speak to him privately. He tells Okonkwo that the Oracle has decreed Ikemefuna must be killed as a part of the retribution for the woman killed three years before in Mbaino. He tells Okonkwo to take no part in the killing since the boy calls him "father."

Later, Okonkwo tells Ikemefuna that the boy is going home to Mbaino, but the boy does not really believe him. When Nwoye hears that his friend is leaving, he bursts into tears and is beaten by his father.

Many men of Umuofia accompany Ikemefuna to the outskirts of

the village and beyond into the forest. With Okonkwo walking near him, Ikemefuna loses his fear and thinks about his family in Mbaino. Suddenly, Okonkwo drops to the rear of the group and Ikemefuna is afraid again. As the boy's back is turned, one of the men strikes the first blow with his machete. Ikemefuna cries out to Okonkwo, "My father, they have killed me!" and runs towards Okonkwo. Afraid to appear weak, Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna with his machete.

When Nwoye learns that Ikemefuna is dead, something changes within him. He recalls the feeling he had one day when he heard a baby crying in the foresta tragic reminder to him of the custom of leaving twins to die in the forest.

Commentary

With the killing of Ikemefuna, Achebe creates a devastating scene which evokes compassion for the young man and foreshadows the fall of Okonkwo, again in the tradition of the tragic hero. Along the way, the author sets up several scenes for juxtaposition with the death scene:

the opening scene of the chapter shows the increasing affection and admiration Okonkwo feels for Ikemefuna, as well as for Nwoye;

on the journey with Ikemefuna and the other men of Umuofia, they hear the "peaceful dance from a distant clan."

In the second chapter, the author commented that the fate of Ikemefuna is a "sad story" that is "still told in Umuofia unto this day," suggesting that the decision to kill him was not a customary one. Before dying, Ikemefuna has thoughts of Okonkwo as his "real father" and of what he would tell his mother, especially about Okonkwo. These elements combine to make us feel that the murder of Ikemefuna is senseless, even if it is in accordance with traditions and village decisions.

This scene is a turning point in the novel. Okonkwo not only participates in the ceremony for sacrificing the boy after being urged not to do so, but he delivers the death blow because he is "afraid of being thought weak." At a deep, emotional level, Okonkwo kills a boy who "could hardly imagine that Okonkwo was not his real father"someone whom Okonkwo truly loves as a son. Not only outwardly has he disregarded his people and their traditions, but he has disregarded his inner feelings of love and protectiveness. This deep abyss between Okonkwo's divided self

accounts for the beginning of his decline.

For the first time in the novel, Okonkwo's son Nwoye emerges as a major character who, in contrast to his father, questions the long-standing customs of the clan. Achebe begins to show the boy's conflicting emotions, torn between being a fiercely masculine and physically strong person to please his father and allowing himself to cherish values and feelings that Okonkwo considers feminine and weak.

eneke-nti-oba a bird that flies endlessly.

entrails guts.

tie-tie a vine used like a rope; from pidgin English for "to tie."

harbingers precursors, or forerunners.

pestle an object used for pounding seeds, plants, and other substances into a powder.

ozo a class of men holding an *ozo* title; it also refers to the ritual which accompanies the granting of a title to a person.

Eze elina, elina . . . a favorite song of Ikemefuna's about how Danda the ant holds court and how the sand dances forever; it was introduced as a story at the end of Chapter Four.

twins According to Igbo custom, twins are considered evil and must be placed in earthenware pots and left to die in the forest.

Chapter Eight

Summary

For two days after Ikemefuna's death, Okonkwo cannot eat or sleep; his thoughts return again and again to the boy who had become like a son to him. On the third day, when his favorite daughter Ezinma brings him the food he has finally requested, he wishes to himself that she were a boy. He asks himself with disgust how a man with his battle record can react like a woman over the death of a boy.

Okonkwo visits his friend Obierika, hoping to escape thoughts of Ikemefuna. He praises Obierika's son Maduka for his victory in the wrestling match and complains about his own son's wrestling skills, mentally likening him to his own weak father, Unoka. To counter that thought with a manly deed of his own, Okonkwo asks his

friend why he didn't join the other men in the sacrifice of Ikemefuna. Obierika replies that he "had something better to do." He expresses his disapproval of Okonkwo's role in killing Ikemefuna. That act, he says, will upset the Earth, and the earth goddess will have her revenge.

A man interrupts them to relay the news of the death of an elder of a neighboring village, a former Umuofia leader. His wife also died later on the same day, which complicates the announcement of his death and his funeral. It is said that they "had one mind," that he could do nothing without telling her. Okonkwo and Obierika disapprove of this lack of manly quality. They also discuss with regret the loss of prestige of the *ozo* title.

Feeling renewed by the conversation, Okonkwo goes home, returning later to take part in a discussion of the bride-price with the suitor of Obierika's daughter. After the preliminaries, the bride-price is decided, using a ritual in which her price is negotiated in numbers represented by quantities of sticks passed back and forth between the bride's family and the groom's relatives.

The men eat and drink for the rest of the evening, ridiculing customs of the neighboring villages, when compared with their own. They also refer contemptuously to "white men," comparing their white skin to lepers' white skin.

Commentary

In these scenes, we begin to see Okonkwo's growing separation from his family members, as well as from his peers in the village. Okonkwo asks Nwoye to sit with him in his hut, seeking affirmation that he has done nothing wrong. But his son pulls away from him. Even his friend, Obierika, disapproves of his role in the killing of Ikemefuna. Obierika is presented as a moderate, balanced man and thus serves as a contrast to Okonkwo. Obierika periodically questions tribal law, believing that some changes in custom could improve their society. Okonkwo tends to cling to tradition regardless of the cost, as the killing of Ikemefuna illustrates. Essentially, Obierika is a man of thought and questioning, while Okonkwo is a man of action without questioning.

However, they both seem to agree that manliness does not allow a man and his wife to be inseparable and outwardly loving to each other. A village woman has died before her husband's death can be publicly announced. (A wife's death soon after her husband's may

be a sign that she is guilty of killing him.) The couple is known to have been almost inseparable in their day-to-day lifea sign of weakness in the husband, according to Okonkwo and Obierika. The village will have to wait until she is buried before they can officially announce the death of this man who was once a great warrior.

As an example of the economic customs of the village, we learn about the marriage negotiations for Obierika's daughter. The opening ceremoniesthe costume and jewelry of the bride, the use of the sticks, and the drinking of the palm-wineillustrate the complexity of Umuofian ritual. These African customs are reminiscent of marriage customs in other cultures in which the bride's parents pay a

dowry or pay the cost of the wedding (although in Igbo custom, the groom himself pays the bride-price). Such customs refute commonly held notions about "primitive" and "uncivilized" African society.

The first shadow of "the white man" appears in community conversation, revealing both a lack of contact with white men and their aversion to them (similar to their aversion to lepers).

plantain a starchy fruit resembling a green banana, grown in clusters at the top of tall trees. Larger than the bananas familiar in the West, plantains can be boiled, fried, roasted, ground, or fermented for beer, and the leaves can be cooked as a vegetable.

taboo a community law or tradition forbidding an action on religious or moral grounds. Here, the taboo is against using a knife to cut the meat of a dog, although using one's teeth is not taboo.

uli a liquid made from seeds that make the skin pucker; it is used for temporary tattoo-like decorations.

jigida strings of hundreds of tiny beads worn snugly around the waist.

"And these white men, they say, have no toes" Their toes are hidden because they are wearing shoes.

leprosy an infection of the skin, eventually causing a whitening of the skin, as well as paralysis and disfigurement. Called Hansen's disease today, it was once mistakenly thought to be contagious by touch, and so its victims, lepers, were objects of fear and loathing and were usually segregated into colonies.

Chapter Nine

Summary

As Okonkwo at last enjoys a good night's sleep, he is awakened by a banging at his door. His wife Ekwefi tells him that Ezinma is dying. Ezinma is Ekwefi's only living child and the light of her life; nine other children have died in infancy. She is also a favorite of Okonkwo, and, because of her spirit and cleverness, he sometimes wishes she had been born a boy. Now, she lies suffering with fever as Okonkwo goes to gather leaves, grasses, and bark for medicine.

Ezinma has survived many periods of illness in her life, and people have considered her an evil *ogbanje*, a child who dies young

because she is possessed by an evil spirit which then re-enters the mother's womb to be born again. But she has lived much longer than Ekwefi's other children, and Ekwefi believes faith will bring the girl a long and happy life. A year ago, she was reassured when a medicine man dug up Ezinma's *iyi-uwa*, an object buried by *ogbanje* children. After Ezinma led the medicine man to the exact spot, he dug a deep pit in which he finally found a shiny pebble wrapped in a rag. Ezinma agreed that it was hers. This unearthing of the *iyi-uwa* was thought to break Ezinma's connection with the *ogbanje* world, and everyone believed she would never be sick again.

At last, Okonkwo returns from the forest and prepares the medicine for his daughter, who inhales the fumes from a steaming pot and is soon sleeping again.

Commentary

Just when Okonkwo's guilt over killing Ikemefuna seems to have lessened, his rarely displayed devotion to his family is again tested. When Ekwefi informs him of his daughter's illness, he rushes out in the middle of the night to hunt for medicine in the woods. By nature, Okonkwo is not a cold and heartless man; he simply cannot escape the haunting images of his despised father's womanly qualities.

Ekwefi's dedication to her daughter Ezinma exemplifies the important role children play in a woman's life in Umuofian society. A woman's status in Igbo society is related to how many children she bears and how many of them are male. Ekwefi says that children are a "woman's crowning glory," and, before Ezinma was born, her own life was consumed with the desire to have a healthy

child. But nine times, she lost children in infancy.

Recall now the casual conversation between Ekwefi and Chielo at the wrestling match (Chapter Six). The two women talked about Ezinma's having "come to stay" this time. This was a reference to her no longer being an *ogbanje* because the medicine man had dug up her *iyi-uwa*.

iba fever, probably related to malaria.

ogbanje a "changeling," or child possessed by an evil spirit that leaves the body upon the child's death only to enter into the mother's womb to be reborn again within the next child's body.

iyi-uwa a special stone linking an *ogbanje* child and the spirit world. The *ogbanje* is protected as long as the stone is not discovered and destroyed.

Chapter Ten

Summary

This chapter is devoted to a detailed description of a village public trial. At a gathering on the large village commons, the elders sit waiting on their stools, as the other men crowd behind them. The women stand around the edges, looking on. A row of nine stools awaits the appearance of the nine *egwugwu*, representing the spirits of their ancestors. Two small clusters of people stand at a respectful distance facing the elders and the empty stools. They are the opposing sides of a family dispute, waiting for a hearing by the masked and costumed *egwugwu*, who finally appear from their nearby house with great fanfare and ceremony. As the *egwugwu* approach the stools, Okonkwo's wives notice that the second *egwugwu* walks with the springy step of Okonkwo, and also that Okonkwo is not seated among the elders, but, of course, they say nothing about this coincidence.

The *egwugwu* hear the case of Uzowulu, who claims that his in-laws took his wife Mgbafo from his house, and therefore they should return her bride-price to him. Odukwe, Mgbafo's brother, does not deny Uzowulu's charges. He claims that his family took Mgbafo to rescue her from daily, brutal beatings by Uzowulu, and he says that she will return to her husband only if he swears never to beat her again.

After the *egwugwu* retire to consult with each other, their leader,

Evil Forest, returns a verdict: he orders Uzowulu to take wine to his in-laws and beg his wife to come back home with him. Evil Forest also reminds the husband that it is not brave to fight with a woman. Evil Forest then instructs Odukwe to accept his brother-in-law's offer and let Mgbafo return to her husband. After the matter is settled, one village elder expresses wonder why such an insignificant dispute would come before the *egwugwu*. Another elder reminds him that Uzowulu will not accept any decision unless it comes from the *egwugwu*.

Another case waits to be heardone involving property.

Commentary

The author gives us a close-up view of the community judicial system with its similarities to Western traditions. In the trial of Uzowulu versus his wife's family, both sides present their cases to the ruling members of society, the *egwugwu*, which has one person as its spokesperson. The nine *egwugwu* represent the nine villages of Umuofia. Okonkwo has obviously risen to a lofty position of village leadership if he has indeed been selected as the *egwugwu* representative for his village.

This representative body has similarities to a jury led by a "foreman/judge." After retiring to the "jury room" for deliberation with the other eight *egwugwu*, the "foreman/judge" returns a verdict which must be carried out. The public is allowed to watch the proceedings within the boundaries of their social groupsthat is, the elders, other men, and women.

The subject of the dispute, domestic violence, is familiar to us today. But the way in which the community views Uzowulu's beating of his wife is not. The verdict illustrates the widespread disregard for women's rights by Umuofian men. After hearing the case, the *egwugwu* order Mgbafo to go back to Uzowulu if he begs her; they remind Uzowulu it is not manly to fight with a woman. The embarrassment of having to beg her to return is the only punishment Uzowulu receives. The case illustrates that in Umuofian culture a woman is the property of her husband, although unwarranted and excessive violence against her is, in theory, inappropriate. Note that one man among the spectators asks why such a "trifle [as wife beating] should come before the *egwugwu*."

The trial and its verdict also remind us of Okonkwo's treatment of his own wives and how quickly such treatment is forgotten.

Aru oyim de de de dei! "Greetings to the physical body of a friend." The *egwugwu* speak in a formal language which the Umuofians have difficulty understanding. Each of the nine *egwugwu* represents a village of the Umuofian community. Together, the *egwugwu* form a tribunal to judge disputes.

Evil Forest the name of the leader of the *egwugwu*; also the name of the forest where taboo objects and people are abandoned.

"I am Dry-meat-that fills-the mouth, I am Fire-that-burns-with-

out-faggots" two phrases suggesting that Evil Forest is "all-powerful." Faggots are bundles of sticks for burning.

Chapter Eleven

Summary

As Okonkwo relaxes in his hut after the evening meal, he listens to the voices of his wives and children telling folk stories. Ekwefi relates to Ezinma the tale of Tortoise, which explains why Tortoise does not have a smooth shell. Just as it becomes Ezinma's turn to tell Ekwefi a story, they all hear the high-pitched wail of Chielo, the priestess of Agbala. She comes to Okonkwo's hut and tells him that Agbala needs to see his daughter Ezinma. He begs her to return in the morning, but Chielo will not listen and proceeds to Ekwefi's hut to find Ezinma.

Terrified of the priestess, Ezinma cries in fear, but is forced to go with Chielo to Agbala's house in the sacred cave, hanging onto Chielo's back. As Ekwefi watches her only daughter leave, she decides to follow her.

Ekwefi runs through the forest in the dark, following Chielo's chanting voice. She finally catches up with them, but keeps out of sight. The priestess, however, senses that someone is following her and curses her pursuer. Ekwefi lets Chielo get farther ahead and soon realizes that they have passed Agbala's cave. They are heading towards Umuachi, the farthest village. But when they reach the village commons, Chielo turns around and begins to return the way she came, eventually moving toward the cave of Agbala.

Chielo and Ezinma disappear into the cave and Ekwefi waits

outside, doubting she can help her daughter if any harm were to come to her. Suddenly, Ekwefi hears a noise behind her and turns to see a man standing with a machete in his hand. Okonkwo has come to take her place outside the cave, but she refuses to leave. She stays with him, grateful for his presence and concern. His strong, silent presence reminds Ekwefi of how she ran away from her first husband to become the wife of Okonkwo.

Commentary

The oral tradition of storytelling in Igbo culture is a means of teaching history and customs, for passing on legends and beliefs,

and for explaining the natural as well as the supernatural worlds. The tradition is particularly well-illustrated in the long story about Tortoise and his shell.

In this chapter, Achebe presents a situation in which Okonkwo and Ekwefi both consider their family more important than the customs of their people or even their own personal safety. Despite Chielo's warning about Agbala, the Oracle"Beware, woman, lest he strike you in his anger"Ekwefi risks her life for the sake of her daughter when she chooses to follow Chielo through the woods. And when Okonkwo goes to the cave to help his wife and protect their daughter, he displays behavior uncharacteristic of hima man whom we have seen use village tradition to a fault in the killing of Ikemefuna.

The priestess Chielo continues to refer to Ezinma as "my daughter," suggesting a relationship that could lead Chielo to choose Ezinma as a priestess. She has twice before acknowledged that Ezinma may have special status because she was, but is no longer, an *ogbanje* (see Chapters Six and Nine).

snuff a form of ground tobacco placed in the nose or mouth.

saltpeter niter, or potassium nitrate, used in the preparation of snuff (also in gunpowder and fireworks).

"Agbala do-o-o-o! . . . Ezinmao-o-o-o" Chielo, the priestess, takes on the voice of the divine Agbala to ask for Ezinma to come to her.

"Tufia-a!" The sound represents spitting and cursing simultaneously.

Chapter Twelve

Summary

After Chielo took Ezinma away, Okonkwo was not able to sleep. He made several trips to the cave before he finally found Ekwefi waiting outside the cave. When Chielo came out of Agbala's cave with Ezinma in the early morning hours, she ignored the waiting Okonkwo and Ekwefi and carried the sleeping Ezinma home to her bed, with the girl's parents following behind.

Now on the following day, the village is celebrating the next event in the marriage of the daughter of Obierika, Okonkwo's friend. The *uri* is a ritual in which the suitor presents palm-wine to

everyone in the bride's immediate family, her relatives, and her extended group of kinsmen. For this ceremony, primarily a woman's ritual, the bride's mother is expected to prepare food for the whole village with the help of other women.

Ekwefi is exhausted after the preceding night's events. She delays going to the celebration until Ezinma wakes and eats her breakfast. Okonkwo's other wives and children proceed to Obierika's compound, the youngest wife promising to return to prepare Okonkwo's afternoon meal.

Obierika is slaughtering two goats for the soup and is admiring another goat that has been brought in from a neighboring village as a gift to the in-laws. He and the other men discuss the medicine-magic used in the other village in order to draw people to the market, where some are robbed in the crowd with the help of the "medicine."

While the women are preparing for the feast, they hear a cry in the distance, revealing that a cow has gotten loose. Leaving a few women to tend the cooking, the rest go to find the cow and drive it back to its owner, who has to pay a heavy fine. The women check among themselves to be sure every available woman has participated in rounding up the cow.

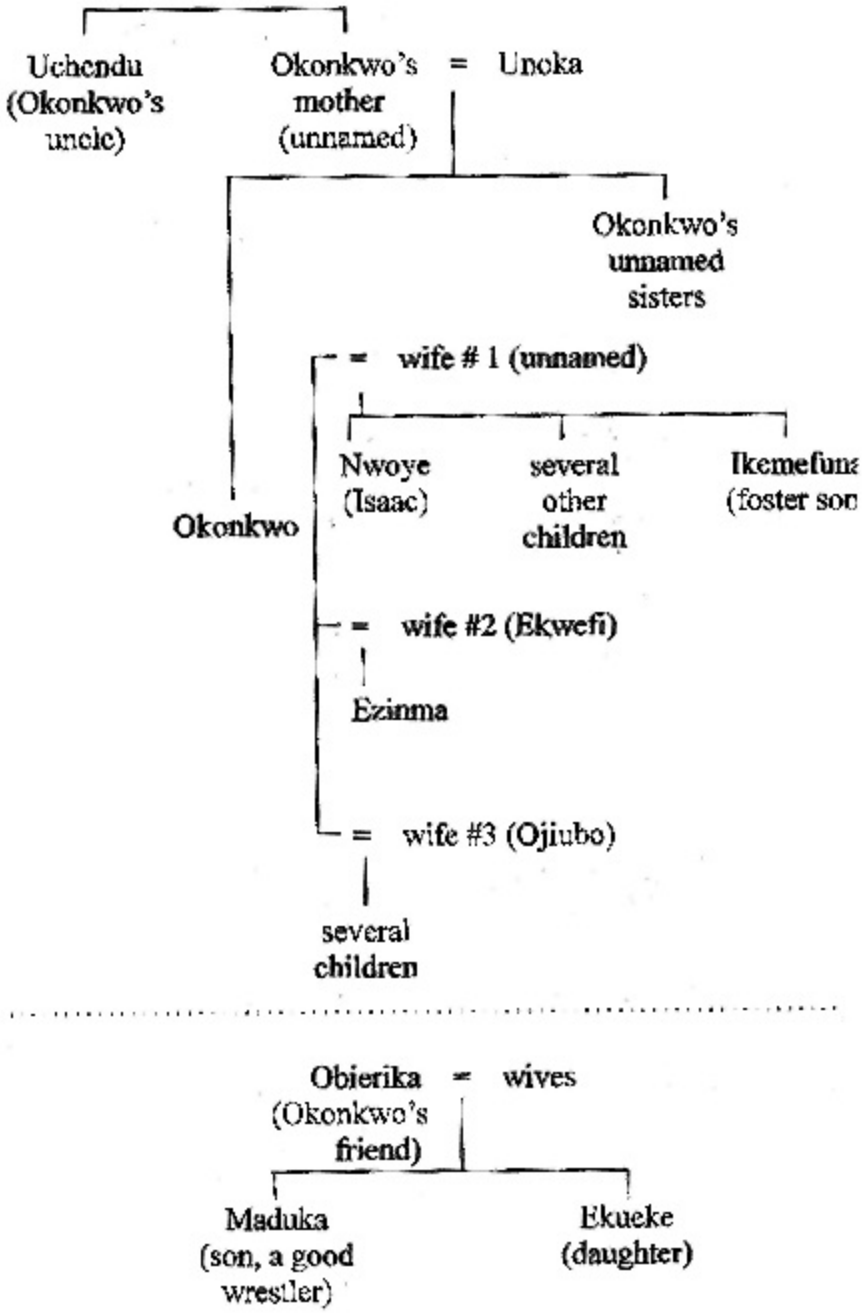
The palm-wine ceremony begins in the afternoon when everyone has gathered and has begun to drink the first-delivered wine. When the new in-laws arrive, they present Obierika's family with fifty pots of wine, a very respectable number. The *uri* festivities continue into the night and end with much singing and dancing.

Commentary

This chapter further contributes to our understanding of several tribal customs and beliefs: the *uri* ceremony, illustrating the phase of the marriage process following the agreement on bride-price (Chapter Eight); the belief in supernatural powers to attract people to a market and even to help rob them; the "law" that requires villagers to control and corral their animals or else pay a penalty; the custom also requires all available women to chase the escaped cow home. These descriptions follow the events of the preceding chapter illustrating how strong the villagers' beliefs are about the earth goddess and her powers, even when they require the near-abduction of a child.

And yet in most such events, we also see less than complete,

Things Fall Apart Genealogy



The setting of *Things Fall Apart* is Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, about one-third larger than Texas. Because of the various ethnic groups that have settled there, it is a fascinating combination of religions, cultures, and histories. The largest of these ethnic groups are the mostly Protestant Yoruba in the west, the Catholic Igbo in the southeast, and the predominantly Muslim Hausa-Fulani in the north. The action in the novel takes place in the southern part of the country, not far from the town of Ogidi, where the author, Chinua Achebe, was born. The time frame for the novel is the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

blind obedience to the law or custom by some men and women, suggesting several strong, individual personalities. For example, Ekwefi is certainly one of the less traditionally constrained women. And Obierika represents men who question some traditions and rituals.

Sexual activity is a subtle part of courtship and marriage rituals. The chant at the end of the celebration says "when I hold her waist beads / She pretends not to know," suggesting that sexual anticipation is an enjoyable game for women as well as for men. In the preceding chapter, Ekwefi fondly remembers the first time Okonkwo "carried her into his bed and . . . began to feel around her waist for the loose end of her cloth," suggesting that Okonkwo's protective, manly presence in the darkness triggers fond memories of that first night in his bed.

umunna the extended family and kinsmen.

a great medicine a supernatural power or magic that may take the shape of a person. In the Umuike market, the medicine is in the shape of an old woman with a beckoning, magical fan.

yam pottage a watery gruel made of yams.

Chapter Thirteen

Summary

In the dead of night, the sound of a drum and a cannon announce the death of Ezeudu, an important man in the village. Okonkwo is chilled to remember that it was Ezeudu who warned Okonkwo that he should play no part in the killing of Ikemefuna.

Everyone in the village gathers for the funeral ceremony of a

warrior who had achieved three titles in his life, a rare accomplishment. During the ceremony, men dance, fire off guns, and dash about in a frenzy of wailing for the loss of Ezeudu. Periodically, the *egwugwu* spirits appear from the underworld, including a one-handed spirit who dances and brings a message for the dead Ezeudu. Before the burial, the dancing, drumming, and gunshots become increasingly intense.

Suddenly an agonized cry and shouts of horror are followed by silence. Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son is found dead in a pool of blood in the midst of the crowd. When Okonkwo fired his gun, it

exploded and a piece of iron pierced the boy's heart. In the history of Umuofia, nothing like this has ever occurred.

Okonkwo's accidental killing of a clansman is a crime against the earth goddess, and he knows he and his family must leave Umuofia for seven years. As his wives and children cry bitterly, they hurriedly pack their most valuable belongings into head-loads to be carried as they prepare to flee before morning to Mbanta, the village of his mother. Friends move Okonkwo's yams to Obierika's compound for storage.

After the family's departure the next morning, a group of village men invade Okonkwo's compound and destroy his barn, houses, and animals, carrying out the traditional justice prescribed by the earth goddess. Okonkwo's friend Obierika mourns his departure and wonders why Okonkwo should be punished so severely for an accident. Again, he ponders the old traditions, remembering his own twin children who had to be abandoned in the forest because of tribal tradition.

Commentary

In the literary tradition of the tragic hero, Okonkwo's undoing continues with his accidental killing of Ezeudu's son. Early in the chapter, Achebe foreshadows the event with Okonkwo's memory of Ezeudu's warning about not killing Ikemefuna. The author builds dramatic tension by describing an increasingly frenzied scene of dancing, leaping, shooting, drumming, gunfiring, as well as the frightening appearance of the *egwugwu*. The action climaxes with an explosion of gunfire, then comes to a stop with the phrase "All was silent." Achebe emphasizes the gravity of Okonkwo's crime by telling us that in Umuofia "nothing like this had ever happened."

As he did earlier in the novel (Chapter Eight), Obierika quietly questions clan traditionsthis time, the tradition that demands that Okonkwo be banished for seven years because of an accidental killing. He also questions the tribal abandonment of twins, remembering his own innocent children left to die in the forest.

The chapter includes several intimations of impending doom for the clan and its traditions. Achebe ends the chapter dramatically with this proverb: "If one finger brought oil, it soiled the others," suggesting that Okonkwo's crime might lead to the ultimate downfall of Umuofia itself.

Go-di-di-go-go-di-go. Di-go-go-di-go. the sound of drumbeats on the *ekwe*.

esoteric specialized or secret, referring here to a language understood by only a few.

raffia a soft, pliant fiber derived from the stalk or leaf of the Madagascar palm tree and used in baskets, rope, mats, hats. In this chapter, smoked raffia has been made into costumes that terrify the villagers.

Mbanta The name means "small town" and is where Okonkwo's mother comes from, his "motherland," beyond the borders of Mbaino (Ikemefuna's original home).

Part Two

Chapter Fourteen

Summary

Okonkwo arrives in Mbanta to begin his seven-year exile. His maternal uncle, Uchendu, now a village elder, welcomes him. Uchendu guesses what has happened, listens to Okonkwo's story, and arranges for the necessary rituals and offerings. Okonkwo is given a plot of land on which to build a compound for his household, and he receives additional pieces of land for farming. Uchendu's five sons each give him three hundred seed-yams to start his farm.

Okonkwo and his family must work hard to develop a new farm, and the work gives him no pleasure because he has lost the vigor and motivation of his younger days. He knows he is merely

"marking time" while he is in Mbanta. He grieves over his interrupted plan to become one of the lords of his clan in Umuofia and blames his *chi* for his failure to achieve lasting greatness. Uchendu senses Okonkwo's depression and plans to speak to him later.

Uchendu's twenty-seven children gather from far and near for an *isa-ifi* ceremony. This final marriage ritual will determine if the intended bride of Uchendu's youngest son has been faithful to him during their courtship. The *isa-ifi* ceremony is described in detail.

The next day, in front of all of his children, Uchendu speaks to Okonkwo about his discouragement and despair. Through a series of questions no one is able to answer, Uchendu helps them all

understand why a man should return to his motherland when he is bitter and depressed. He advises Okonkwo to comfort his family and prepare them for his eventual return to Umuofia, and, meanwhile, to accept the support of his kinsmen while he is here. If Okonkwo denies the support of his motherland, he could displease the dead. Uchendu points out that many people suffer more serious setbacks than a seven-year exile.

Commentary

Here, Achebe presents a paradox about the "manly" and "womanly" aspects of Okonkwo's circumstances. Okonkwo begins his exile deeply discouraged and unmotivated. While striving for ever-greater manliness, he committed a "female"murderthat is, he accidentally killed a boy during the funeral ceremony. To make things even worse (in his mind), he has been exiled to the "woman's" side of his family. He thus feels that this transition is an extraordinary challenge to his manliness. His uncle reminds him, though, in the presence of his own large family, that Okonkwo should use the nurturing (womanly) quality of his "motherland," accept his situation and recover, which is, in fact, far less devastating than it might be. Okonkwo needs to maintain the positive, responsible leadership (both male and female qualities) of his own family in preparation for their eventual return to Umuofia. The "womanly" aspect of family support in this village of his mother's is not to be ignored while Okonkwo waits for the right to return to his own "manly" village.

In earlier chapters, Okonkwo acknowledged the vital role of *chi* in his life. In this chapter, he seems to realize that his *chi* "was not made for great things"a reluctant admission that he may not

achieve everything he wants because it is not his fate to do so. His acceptance of this possible limitation does not last, however.

With the description of the *isa-ifi* ceremony, this chapter completes the reader's view of the complex Igbo marriage rituals, albeit for a different couple than were the earlier rituals.

twenty and ten years Igbo counting may not have a unique number for thirty, which is thus counted as "twenty and ten." Similarly, in French, for example, seventy is counted as "sixty-ten," and eighty is "four twenties."

"It is female *ochu*." Crimes are divided into male and female types. Okonkwo's accidental killing of Ezeudu's son is considered manslaughter and therefore a "female" crime.

"the nuts of the water of heaven" hailstones.

isa-ifi the ceremony in which the bride is judged to have been faithful to her groom.

umuada daughters who have married outside the clan.

Chapter Fifteen

Summary

During Okonkwo's second year in exile, his good friend Obierika and two other young men pay him a visit in Mbanta. After being introduced to Uchendu, Obierika relays tragic news about the village of Abame:

One day a white man rode into the village on a bicycle, which the villagers called an "iron horse." At first, people ran away from the man, but those less fearful walked up to him to touch his white skin. The elders of Abame consulted their Oracle, which told them that the white man would destroy their clan and others were on their way, coming like locusts. Confronting the villagers, the white man seemed only to repeat a word like "Mbaino," perhaps the name of the village he was looking for. They killed the white man and tied his bicycle to their sacred tree.

Weeks later, three other white men and a group of "ordinary men like us" came to the village while most villagers were tending their farms. After the visitors saw the bicycle on the tree, they left. Many weeks later, the whole clan was gathered at the Abame market

when a large group of men surrounded the market; they shot and killed almost everyone. The village is now deserted.

Okonkwo and Uchendu agree that the Abame villagers were foolish to kill a man about whom they knew nothing. They have heard stories about white men coming with guns and strong drink and taking slaves away across the sea, but they never believed the stories.

After their meal together, Obierika gives Okonkwo the money he received for selling some of Okonkwo's yams and seed-yams. He promises to continue to do this until Okonkwo returns to

Umuofiaor until "green men will come to our clan and shoot us."

Commentary

Recall here the joking reference to white men as lepers in Chapter Eight. Now, in Chapter Fifteen, the first white man ever seen in Abame is initially a matter of curiosity, especially his skin color and perhaps his bicycle. Then the villagers consult their Oracle, which predicts that white men will be instruments of disaster for the clan. Only then do the villagers take violent action against this individual white man, an action criticized as premature even by Uchendu and Okonkwo.

Of course, the retaliation by a large group of white men laterwiping out the entire villageis out of proportion to the initial crime. But this excessive action is Achebe's way of beginning the novel's characterization of extremist whites and their oppressive, often uninformed, and insensitive attitude toward the natives. From this point on, the two groups are depicted as adversaries, and future conflict seems inevitable.

The Abame disaster is based on an actual event in 1905, in the community of Ahiara. More information about the incident and its consequences appears in an earlier section, A Brief History of Nigeria.

The chapter ends with a light-hearted exchange that seems ominous only when we know the ending of the novel:

> Okonkwo: "I do not know how to thank you."
>
> Obierika: "I can tell you. Kill one of your sons for me."
>
> Okonkwo: "That will not be enough."

Obierika: "Then kill yourself."

Okonkwo: "Forgive me. I shall not talk about thanking you any more."

albino a person with a pale skin due to an inherited deficiency an the skin pigment melanin.

Eke day, Afo day The Igbo week has four days: Eke, Oye, Afo, and Nkwo.

iron horse the bicycle that the white man was riding when he apparently got lost.

Chapter Sixteen

Summary

Two more years pass before Obierika visits Mbanta a second time, again with unhappy news. White Christian missionaries have arrived in Umuofia, built a Christian church, and recruited some converts. The leaders of the clan are disappointed in the villagers, but believe that the converts are only *efulefu*, the worthless and weak men of the village. None of the converts holds a title in the clan.

Obierika's real reason for the visit is to inform Okonkwo that he saw Nwoye with some missionaries in Umuofia. When Obierika asked Nwoye why he was there, Nwoye responded that he was now "one of them." When asked about his father, Okonkwo, Nwoye replied that "he is not my father."

Okonkwo will not talk to his friend about Nwoye. It was only after talking with Nwoye's mother that Obierika is able to learn what happened: six men arrived in Mbanta, including one white man. Everyone was curious to see him after hearing the story of the Abame destruction. The white man had an Igbo interpreterwith a strange dialectand, through him, spoke to them about Christianity. He told them about a new god who created the world and humankind; this new god would replace the false gods of wood and stone they now worship. Worship of the true god insures that they will live forever in the new god's kingdom. The white man told them that he and his people would be coming to live with them, bringing many iron horses they could ride.

The villagers asked many questions. When the missionary insisted

their gods were deceitful and arbitrary, the crowd began to move away. Suddenly, the missionaries began singing a joyful hymn and captured their attention once again.

Okonkwo decided that the man spoke nonsense and walked away. But Nwoye was impressed with the compassion of the new religion. It seemed to answer questions he had about customs that included the killing of twins and of Ikemefuna.

Commentary

Obierika is able to understand Nwoye's blunt statement only after he talks to Nwoye's mother. Her story may be more sympathetically narrated because she would be protective of Nwoye.

The Christian missionaries seem to win over many people of Mbanta rather quickly. The earliest converts are people who have low status within the clan. The missionaries' promises fill a void in the lives of such converts. The Christian hymn, for example, touches the "silent and dusty chords in the heart of an Ibo man." (Note the old-style spelling of "Ibo" in the text.)

Note too that the white man is not personalized yethe remains a stereotype of a white missionary, although somewhat more patient in his responses than might be expected.

Considering the fate of the Abame village after the arrival of the white men, Mbanta's welcome of the missionaries is surprising. The presence of only one white person among the missionaries may have eased the villager's fears of the missionaries. The villagers are understandably skeptical about the Christian message, but still curious to learn more about both the strange religion and the white skin they have never seen before. The missionaries' use of rhythmic, evangelistic hymns is obviously a good strategy for expanding their message through a sympathetic medium. They also promise new experiences, such as riding a bicycle, once they have moved into the community.

We should not be surprised that Nwoye is highly receptive to the new, more humane-appearing doctrine, since we know he is a sensitive young man with deep concerns about certain customs of his people (see Chapter Seven).

Achebe provides a humorous illustration of the difficulties of dialects, even within the Igbo language. The missionary's translator is an Igbo, but he has a dialect that pronounces some words and expressions differently from Umuofian Igbo: the word "myself"

comes out as "my buttocks," resulting in some humorous translations of the white man's message.

efulefu worthless men, in the eyes of the community.

evangelism the preaching of a specific religious gospel; the activity of a missionary.

Jesu Kristi Jesus Christ.

callow immature, or naive.

Chapter Seventeen

Summary

The story of how Nwoye became a Christian continues:

The missionaries slept in the Mbanta marketplace for several nights and preached the Christian gospel each morning. After several days, they asked the leaders of the clan for land on which to build a church. The elders agreed to give them a part of the Evil Forest, in which are buried those who have died of evil disease, as well as the magical objects of great medicine men. The elders thought the missionaries were fools for taking the cursed land, for, according to tradition, the missionaries would be dead in a few days.

To the villagers' surprise and disappointment, the missionaries built their church without difficulty. The people of Mbanta began to realize that the white man had incredible magic and power, especially when the missionaries and the church survived even twenty-eight daysthe longest period the gods allowed a person to defy them. The missionaries soon had more converts, including their first womanpregnant and previously the mother to four sets of twins, all of whom had been abandoned in the forest. The white missionary went on to Umuofia, while his interpreter, Mr. Kiaga, assumed responsibility for the Mbanta congregation.

As the number of converts grew, Nwoye secretly became increasingly attracted to the religion, wanting to attend Sunday church service, but fearing the wrath of his father if he entered the church.

One day Okonkwo's cousin saw Nwoye inside the Christian church. He rushed to tell Okonkwo, who said nothing until his son

returned home. In a rage, he asked Nwoye where he had been, but got no answer. When he starting beating Nwoye with a heavy stick, his uncle Uchendu demanded that Okonkwo leave his son alone. Nwoye left the hut and never returned. Instead, Nwoye moved to Umuofia, where the white missionary had started a school for young people. He planned to return someday to convert his mother, brothers, and sisters.

At first, Okonkwo was furious with his son's action, but he concluded that Nwoye was not worth his anger. He feared that after his death his sons would abandon the family ancestors because they

had become attracted to the new religion. Okonkwo wondered how he had given life to such a foolish and womanly son, one who resembled his grandfather Unoka in so many ways.

Commentary

As the Christians begin to gain power, the villagers see their traditional beliefs as increasingly outdated and powerless. For example, Mbanta's Evil Forest proves to be less sinister than they have believed; their gods allow the missionaries to escape punishment. Here, Achebe implies that clinging to old traditions and an unwillingness to change may contribute to their downfall. Achebe does not pass judgment on their point of view, but illustrates the kinds of circumstances that could make "things fall apart."

The missionaries are beginning to influence not only the community's religious views and practices, but also its deeper social customs and traditions; for example, they welcome the first female convert, a woman who is scorned by the community because of her four sets of twins. To her, as well as to other early converts shunned by the clan for one reason or another, the missionaries provide support and acceptance. The missionaries will not "throw away" newborn twins, and the community will eventually see that they are as normal as other children.

The missionaries apparently expect the new Christians in the community to accept a new weekly calendar: "come [to church] every seventh day." Suddenly, the narrative refers to "Sunday" instead of the Igbo days of the week. Did the missionaries know about the Igbo four-day week? Did they preach the seven-day creation story? Consider the impact on a community when

outsiders impose a new arrangement of days and weeks.

Okonkwo's violent reaction to Nwoye's conversion is typical. He immediately wants to kill the Christians. He recalls that he is popularly called the "Roaring Flame." Then he blames the "effeminacy" of his son on his wife and his father, and then on his own *chi*. The last line in the chapter suggests that Okonkwo has an insight: "Living fire begets cold, impotent ash"perhaps a realization that his own "Roarding Flame" behavior leaves behind coldness and powerlessness in othersas it has in his son.

fetish a charm, or talisman; an object considered to have extraordinary power.

impudent insulting, rude, arrogant (the villagers' initial attitude toward the missionaries who ignore traditional gods and ancestors).

Chapter Eighteen

Summary

Initially, the church and the clan remain segregated from one another in Mbanta. The people of the village believe that eventually the Christians will weaken and die, especially since they live in the dreaded forest, where they even rescue twins abandoned in the woods.

One day, three converts come into the village saying the traditional gods are dead, and the converts are ready to burn their shrines. The clan men severely beat the converts, after which nothing happens between the Christians and the clan for a long time. Eventually, rumors circulate that the church has set up its own government. But the villagers remain unconcerned about the churchuntil a new issue emerges.

The outcasts of Mbanta, the *osu*, live in a special section of the village and are forbidden to marry a free person or to cut their hair. They are to be buried in the evil forest when they die. When the *osu* see that the church welcomes twins into their congregation, they think they may be welcome also. After two outcasts attend service, other church members protest, saying that Mr. Kiaga does not understand the disgrace of associating with *osu*. But Mr. Kiaga says the *osu* need the church more than anyone, and so he welcomes them, instructing them to shave off their mark of

shametheir dirty, tangled hair. One prior convert chooses to return to the clan, but the others find strength and understanding in the missionaries' point of view. Most other *osu* become Christians, and the outcasts become the most dedicated members of the congregation.

A year later, one of the *osu* converts named Okoli is rumored to have killed the sacred python, their most respected animal. The clan rulers and elders gather in Mbanta to decide on a punishment for the crime that no one had ever believed would happen. Okonkwo, who has gained a leadership role in his motherland, believes the clan should react with violence, but the elders opt more

peacefully to exclude church members from all aspects of clan life, much to Okonkwo's disgust.

The proclamation of exclusion keeps the Christians from the market, the stream, the chalk quarry, and the red-earth pit. From the beginning, Okoli denies killing the python, but now he cannot speak for himself because he is ill; by the end of the day, he is dead. The villagers see his death as an act of revenge by the gods, so they agree not to bother the Christians.

Commentary

Okonkwo's views toward the Christians and his desire for a violent solution begin to separate him from the rest of his new Mbanta clana "womanly clan," he thinks. He feels that simply excluding the Christians from several public places is a womanly solution.

The church and the village are delicately maintaining an equilibrium by avoiding each other, hoping not to come into contact or conflict with one another. When they do, violence sometimes erupts, as when the three converts make fun of the old gods. But as more new converts strengthen the church, they in turn weaken the clan, causing increased tension among the non-Christians as well as between the Christians and the non-Christians. When the church seems to have violated something "sacred" in the clan tradition, it upsets the precarious balance between church and clana balance that is becoming increasingly more difficult to maintain. Yet even that crisis is resolved without violence.

The increasing strength of the new church is represented by the considerable preparations being made for the Christian Holy Week and Easter.

osu a class of people in Igbo culture considered outcasts, not fit to associate with "free-born" members of the clan.

caste a designated social class or level of society.

heathen someone who is unconverted to a particular view of God, as in one of the mainstream religions.

python a large snake (boa constrictor) native to several African and Asian countries.

defecates empties one's bowels.

ostracize exclude from contact; shun, "blackball," banish.

Chapter Nineteen

Summary

Although Okonkwo has achieved status in his motherland, he feels his seven years here have been wasted. He could have risen to the peak of Umuofian society if he had not been forced into exile. At the beginning of his last year in exile in Mbanta, Okonkwo sends money to Obierika in Umuofia to rebuild two huts on the site of his burned-out compound. He will build the remainder when he returns in a year.

As the time approaches for his family's return to Umuofia, Okonkwo instructs his wives and children to prepare a huge feast for his mother's kinsmen in Mbanta in a gesture to show his gratitude for kindness over the years of exile. Invited to the feast are all the living descendants of an ancestor who lived two hundred years earlier. Family members pick and prepare vegetables, slaughter goats and fowl, and prepare traditional dishes.

At the feast, Uchendu is honored as the oldest man at the feast; he breaks the kola nut and prays for health and children. As the wine is drunk, one of the oldest members of the clan thanks Okonkwo for his generosity in providing the magnificent feast. He then addresses the young people of the clan, disheartened at seeing the bonds of family and village breaking down as the Christians pull so many of the clan away, even from within families. He fears for the future of the young people and for the survival of the clan itself.

Commentary

Okonkwo's final days in Mbanta are characterized by his usual striving to impress, never doing anything by halves. He expresses

his thanks to his motherland's relatives with an extravagant celebration. Okonkwo hasn't changed much during his seven years in Mbanta, and he is eager to return to Umuofia to make up for lost time. He reveres Umuofia because it is a strong and masculine community, unlike Mbanta, which he has labeled a "womanly clan."

Achebe ends the chapter and Part Two with a foreshadowing of what is to follow: An elder member of the clan tells the young people, "I fear for you; I fear for the clan."

the wherewithal the means or supplies necessary to carry out an endeavor.

egusi melon seeds prepared for a soup.

"I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle." One must act according to one's fortune and circumstances; spittle is one's spit.

umunna the extended family, the clan.

Part Three

Chapter Twenty

Summary

During Okonkwo's first year in exile, he had begun to plan his grand return to Umuofia. He is determined to compensate for the seven years he considers wasted. Not only will he build a bigger compound than before, but he will build huts for two new wives.

His plans for a triumphant return, however, are momentarily disrupted when Nwoye joins the Christians. At first, his oldest son's action depresses him. But he is confident that his other five sons will not disappoint him. Okonkwo also takes pride in his daughters, especially Ezinma, who has grown into a beautiful young woman. Her periods of illness are almost non-existent. Many suitors in Mbanta have asked for her hand in marriage, but she has refused them all, knowing her father wishes her to marry in Umuofia. Moreover, she has encouraged her half-sister Obiageli to do the same.

When Okonkwo returns to his village in Umuofia, he finds it

greatly changed in his absence. The Christian church has won many converts, including respected men who have renounced their traditional titles. The white men have established a government court of law in Umuofia, where they try those who break the white men's laws; they have also built a prison, where lawbreakers are sent for punishment. The white men employ natives as their "court messengers"much like today's sheriff's deputiesto do the "dirty work" of arresting, guarding, and administering punishment to offending citizens.

Okonkwo wonders why his fellow Umuofians don't use violence to rid themselves of the white man's church and oppressive

government. His friend Obierika says they fear a fate like Abame's, the village destroyed by the white intruders. He also tells Okonkwo about a villager who was hanged by the government because of an argument over a piece of land. He points out that any violence would pit clansmen against one another, since so many clan members have already joined the church. Obierika reflects on how the white men settled in quietly with their religion, and then stayed to govern harshly, without ever learning the language or customs and without listening to reason.

Commentary

Okonkwo's concern about his status when he returns to Umuofia reminds us that status and mobility within Umuofian society is largely self-determined: All males except outcasts have opportunities to move upward in the clan through hard work, wise use of resources, and gaining titles. Prominent status is essential to Okonkwo in his drive for manliness. Having been out of the community for seven years, Okonkwo lost his status among the village elders and the other *egwugwu*, and he has fallen behind in obtaining titles in the clan. He can compensate by making a show of his larger compound, more barns, and more wives, and by starting to initiate his sons (other than Nwoye) into gaining titlessomething few men can afford to do. He seems to be suppressing his sorrow over the "loss" of Nwoye and his disappointment about the loss of community position by reaffirming his beliefs in traditional Igbo ways and taking traditional steps toward recognition.

In light of his near-obsession with status and titles, Okonkwo must find it particularly hard to understand how some of the leaders of

the community would give up their titles when they became Christians.

In Part Two of the book, the major change introduced by the white man was the Christian church, which had the effect of not only dividing the community, but dividing families. In this first chapter of Part Three, the white man's government assumes a central role, not only with its court and its "court messengers," but also with its prison and its executions. These changes are reported by Achebe in an ironic tone, as if the establishment of a "government" by the white colonialists was the Igbos' first experience with government, as if there had been no justice system prior to the arrival of the

whites. The tone is especially ironic because earlier, Achebe took great pains to illustrate not only the varieties of justice meted out by the Oracle (Okonkwo's banishment) and by the general citizenry (reprimands about violating the Week of Peace and about women not helping in the recovery of a stray cow), but also the processes followed and the types of justice meted out by the formal court (Chapter Ten). Remember that one of Achebe's goals in writing this novel was to demonstrate that Igbo society had a sophisticated society, religion, and justice system long before the Europeans arrived.

Achebe describes a colonial government that subdues the Igbo people by dividing them and suppressing them without its members bothering to learn their language or trying to understand their traditions and ways. (The first church representative, Mr. Brown, is the exception in accommodating to Igbo language and customs.)

By recruiting other African nativesthe *kotmas*, or court messengersto be their agents in the day-to-day enforcement of their authority, the British bring into their employ people with skin color and language characteristics much like the local natives (although their dialect was apparently different)people who seem to be "friends" of the local natives. Ultimately these imports abused their positions by beating prisoners and taking bribes.

When Okonkwo tells Obierika that his fellow Umuofians should rise up against the British, Obierika wisely understands it is already too late. Many Umuofians have already "joined the ranks of the stranger." Obierika says that the white man "has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart"the first specific acknowledgment of the book's title, *Things Fall Apart*.

anklet of his titles When a man achieves his first title, he wears a special anklet to indicate this title, as well as other, later ones.

sacrament of Holy Communion the most sacred ritual in which the practicing Christian is permitted to participate.

court messengers, or *kotma* the native Africans hired by the British to carry out their law enforcement activities. *Kotma* is a Pidgin English word derived from the words "court" and "messenger."

Chapter Twenty-One

Summary

Not all members of the Igbo clan in Umuofia dislike the changes taking place. The Europeans are bringing wealth to the village as they begin to export palm-oil and palm nut kernels.

The white missionary, Mr. Brown, takes time to learn about the Igbo form of worship, often discussing religion with one of the elders of the clan. The two men debate the forms, actions, and attitudes of their respective gods. Mr. Brown restrains overeager members of his church from provoking those who cling to the old ways. Through his gentle patience, Mr. Brown becomes friends with some of the clan leaders, who begin to listen to and understand his message.

Mr. Brown urges the people of the clan to send their children to his school. He tells them that education is the key to maintaining control of their land. Eventually, people of all ages begin to listen to his message and attend his school. Mr. Brown's crusade gains power for the whites and for the church, but takes its toll on his health. He is forced to leave his congregation and return home.

Before Mr. Brown goes home, he visits Okonkwo to tell him that Nwoyenow called isaachas been sent to a teaching college in a distant town. Okonkwo drives the missionary out and orders him never to return.

Everything about the changed community of Umuofia displeases Okonkwo. His homecoming was not what he hoped; no one really took much notice of his arrival. he can't even proceed with the ceremonies for his sons, because the rites are held only once every

three years, and this is not the year for them. The dissolution of the old way of life saddens him as he sees the once-fierce Umuofians becoming more and more "soft like women." He mourns for the clan, "which he saw breaking up and falling apart"a phrase again reminding us of the book's title.

Commentary

In this chapter, a third institution is established by the British in Umuofiatrade with the outside world. The Europeans buy palmoil and palm kernels from the Igbo at a high price, and many Umuofians profit from the trade. These Umuofians welcome the new

trading opportunities although those very activities are effectively undermining the clan and its self-sufficiency. Through narrative that gradually introduces these key, outside influences religion, government, and commerceAchebe is showing us how the British convinced so many Umuofians to welcome them in spite of their disruption of daily life and customs.

Indeed, the British seem to provide "advantages" lacking in Umuofian culture. The established members of the village welcome new opportunities for wealth. At the other end of the social scale, the disenfranchised members of Igbo society find acceptance in Christianity that they didn't experience in the so-called old ways. Mr. Brown builds a school and a much-needed small hospital in Umuofia; both the school and the hospital produce immediate and impressive results.

So the Umuofians now have "more." Are they better off because of these additions to their lives? The British thought so and expected them to agree.

Achebe has said he may have unconsciously modeled Mr. Brown, the white missionary, after G.T. Basden, a real-life missionary who worked among the Igbo in the early twentieth-centurya man who was a friend of Achebe's parents. Like Brown, Basden was a patient man who was willing to learn about so-called heathen traditions and values. However, Basden ultimately misunderstood Igbo culture, writing in *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (1921): ". . . the black man himself does not know his own mind. He does the most extraordinary things, and cannot explain why he does them . . . He is not controlled by logic."

the new dispensation the new system, the new organization of

society under British influence.

kernels found in the fleshy remains of the palm nut after its husk is crushed for palm-oil. The kernels can be processed by machine for the extraction of a very fine oil.

Ikenga a carved wooden figure kept by every man in his shrine to symbolize the strength of a man's right hand.

Chukwu the leading god in the Igbo hierarchy of gods.

the D.C. the District Commissioner.

singlets sleeveless undershirts; similar to today's athletic shirts.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Summary

The new head of the Christian church, the Reverend James Smith, has nothing of Mr. Brown's compassion, kindness, or accommodation. He despises the way Mr. Brown tried to lead the church. He finds many converts unfamiliar with important religious ideas and rituals, proving to him that Mr. Brown cared only about recruiting converts, rather than making them Christians. He vows to get the church back on the narrow path and soon demonstrates his intolerance of clan customs by suspending a young woman whose husband mutilated her dead *ogbanje* child in the traditional way. The missionary does not believe that such children go back into the mother's womb to be born again, and he condemns those who have such beliefs as carrying out the work of the devil.

Each year, the Igbo clan holds a sacred ceremony to honor the earth deity. The *egwugwu*, ancestral spirits of the clan, dance in the tradition of the celebration. Enoch, an energetic and zealous convert, often provokes violent quarrels with those he sees as enemies. Approaching the *egwugwu*, who are keeping their distance from the Christians, Enoch dares the *egwugwu* to touch a Christian, so one of the *egwugwu* strikes him with a cane. Enoch responds by pulling the spirit's mask off, a serious offense to the clan because, according to Umuofian tradition, the ancestral spirit is killed by the unmasking.

The next day, the *egwugwu* from all the villages gather in the marketplace. They storm Enoch's compound and destroy it with fire and machetes. Enoch takes refuge in the church compound, but the *egwugwu* follow him. Mr. Smith meets the men at the church

door. The masked *egwugwu* begin to move toward the church, but are quieted by their leader. He belittles Mr. Smith and his interpreter when they cannot understand what he is saying. He tells them that the *egwugwu* will not harm Mr. Smith for the sake of Mr. Brown, who was their friend. Mr. Smith will be able to stay safely in his house in Umuofia and worship his own god, but they intend to destroy the church that has caused the Igbo so many problems. Through his interpreter, Mr. Smith tries to calm them and asks that they leave the matter to him, but the *egwugwu* demolish his church, satisfying the clan spirit for the moment.

Commentary

Throughout the book Achebe has given his characters names with hidden meaningsthat is, "Okonkwo" implies male pride and stubbornness. When Achebe adds British characters, he gives two of them very common and unremarkable British names, Brown and Smith. His third British character, the District Commissioner, is known only by his title. This choice of names and "no name" is in itself a commentary by Achebe on the incoming faceless strangers.

Achebe portrays Mr. Smith as a stereotype of the inflexible Christian missionary in Africa. He is a hellfire-and-brimstone type of preacher, who likens Igbo religion to the pagan prophets of Baal of the Old Testament and brands traditional Igbo beliefs as the work of the devil. Achebe suggests that the issue between Mr. Smith and the local people may be more than one of religion: "[Mr. Smith] saw things as black and white. And black was evil."

Mr. Smith preaches an uncompromising interpretation of the scriptures. He suspends a woman convert who allows an old Igbo belief about the *ogbanje* to contaminate her new Christian way of life. He labels this as "pouring new wine into old bottles," an act prohibited in the New Testament of the Christian Bible: "Neither do men put new wine into old bottles" (Matthew 9:17).

Achebe implies that strict adherence to scripture and dogma produces religious fanaticism. Enoch's unmasking of an *egwugwu* is portrayed as a result of unbridled fanaticism. In traditional Igbo religion, unmasking the *egwugwu* kills the ancestral spirit communicating through the *egwugwu*. Enoch's action exposes the non-divine nature of an *egwugwu*another sign of "things falling apart." Ironically, the outcome of Enoch's fanaticism must surely

cause some clan members to question their long-held, sacred beliefs regarding the *egwugwu*.

Consistent with his high-energy radicalism, Enoch is disappointed that his action and its consequences do not provoke "a holy war" against the Igbo non-believers. "Holy war" was the term applied by zealot Christians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to the Crusades against the infidels, non-believers in Christianity.

The reference to the Mother of Spirits is another foreshadowing of the decline of the Umuofians. Her wailing and crying signals the death of "the very soul of the tribe." Enoch's unmasking of the *egwugwu* and the subsequent destruction of the church by the Igbo

represent the climax of confrontation between traditional Igbo religious belief and British colonial Christianity, and, to a great extent, these events symbolize the broader cultural confrontation. Even the *egwugwu* leader acknowledges the cultural standoff between them: "We say he [Mr. Smith] is foolish because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his." Such an acknowledgment seems an indication that the Igbo are becoming resigned to their "new dispensation"that they are moving toward a collective surrender to becoming "civilized" under the onslaught of forces far more organized and powerful than themselves.

about sheep and goats and about wheat and tares Two frequently quoted teachings of Jesus relate to the need for separating the "good" from the "bad." In one, he refers to separating the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:32); in the other, separating the wheat from the tares, or weeds (Matthew 13:30). Mr. Smith was obviously much concerned about dividing the community between the good (the Christian converts) and the bad (the traditional Igbo believers). Not coincidentally, his suspension of a convert is also based on a quotation from Matthew (9:17).

prophets of Baal Mr. Smith is comparing the pagan worship of the warrior-god Baal, mentioned in the Old Testament (I Kings 18) to the Igbo religion. The Israelites saw the worship of Baal as a rival to their worship of God, causing the prophet Elijah to challenge the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

bull-roarer a noisemaker made from a length of string or rawhide threaded through an object of wood, stone, pottery, or bone; a ritual device that makes a loud humming noise when swung rapidly

overhead.

ogwu medicine, magic.

desecrated violated, defiled.

"The body of the white man, I salute you." The *egwugwu* speak indirectly, using a formal language of immortal spirits.

guttural throaty.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Summary

Okonkwo is pleased about the destruction of the church and

feels that daily life is beginning to seem normal again. For once, the clan listened to his advice and acted like warriors, although they didn't kill the missionary or drive the Christians out of Umuofia as he had urged.

When the District Commissioner returns from a trip and learns about the destruction of the church, he asks six leaders of the village, including Okonkwo, to meet with him in his government office. The six men agree, but go to the meeting armed with their machetes.

The District Commissioner asks the village leaders, who have set their weapons aside, to explain their actions at the church to him and to twelve other government men. As one of the leaders begins to tell about Enoch's unmasking of an *egwugwu*, the twelve government men surprise the clan leaders by handcuffing them and taking them into a guardroom.

The Commissioner reminds them that he and his government are there peacefully and want to help them be happy. When they treat others wrongly, they must be judged in the government court of lawthe law of the Commissioner's "great queen." They were wrong to hurt others and burn Enoch's house and the church. As a consequence, they will be kept in prison, where they will be treated well and will be set free only after paying a fine of two hundred bags of cowries.

In prison, the six leaders are repeatedly mistreated by their guards, including having their heads shaved. The prisoners sit in silence for two days without food, water, or toilet facilities. On the third day, in desperation, they finally talk among themselves about paying the fine. Okonkwo reminds them they should have followed his advice

and killed the white man when they had the chance. A guard hears him and hits them all with his stick.

As soon as the leaders were locked up, court messengers went around the village telling everyone the prisoners will be released only after the village pays a fine of two hundred and fifty bags of cowriesfifty of which the messengers will keep for themselves. Rumors circulated about possible hangings and shootings as in Abame, including the families of the prisoners. At a town meeting, the Umuofians decide to collect the money immediately.

Commentary

This chapter describes the oppressive, yet naive approach the

British took to ensure colonial justice. Although the District Commissioner says he wants to hear both sides of the clan leaders' story, he doesn't trust the leaders and imprisons them while he collects a fine from the village. The Commissioner informs them that the British "have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy." He may sincerely believe that statement, and he may also believe that the British have the court messengers under control when he assigns them as guards and as fine collectors. Those *kotma*, however, not only abuse the prisoners, but go to the villagers to collect a fine considerably larger than what the Commissioner asks for so they can keep a sizable portion for themselves.

The District Commissioner's statements and personal actions are ironic in light of what is actually taking place: The British have decided they know what is best for the colony and for the Igbo and will go to violent and repressive lengths to bring that about. They imply this is all justified in the name of their great sovereign, Queen Victoria, "the most powerful ruler in the world."

A recurring theme underlying the occupation by the British is the fact that the Africans are divided among themselvesan illustration of "divide and conquer." To help enforce their policies, the British employ other Africans to help them carry out their occupation and rule. The white colonialists apparently assume their black subordinates would gain the confidence of the black natives. The British may not be aware that their "court messengers," although apparently Igbo, have customs, language, and values different from the Umuofians, and already have traditional antagonisms toward the Umuofian Igbo. It is clear they do not understand Umuofian

culture when they joke about so many Umuofians having titles. They abuse their power by physically abusing their prisoners and by asking the clan for an extra fifty bags of cowries for themselves. Because the court messengers are also the translators between the British and the Igbo, their opportunity for corruption is great. Those British who are aware of the brutality and corruption of their court messengers probably take refuge in the rationalization that the endthe ultimate "civilizing" of the nativesjustifies the means.

The other method by which the British have divided the Igbo is through the introduction of Christianity, which, as we have seen, results in the division of a community into opposing groups of citizens. Remember that the destruction of the church was triggered by

the actions, not of a white man, but of Enoch, a converted clansmanthe ultimate irony.

palaver a discussion; a term of Portuguese origin meaning "talk," used throughout European colonies in Africa and South America.

a great queen Queen Victoria, reigning head of the British Empire for sixty-four years (18371901).

"Who is the chief among you?" The *kotma* guards see by the anklets that all these leaders have titles and joke that they must not be worth much.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Summary

The District Commissioner sets the six men free after the village pays the required fine, and the leaders quietly return to their homes, deep in misery and not speaking to anyone they meet. Okonkwo's relatives and friends are waiting for him in his hut, and his friend Obierika urges him to eat the food his daughter Ezinma has prepared for him. No one else speaks, seeing the scars on his back where the prison guards beat him.

That night, the village crier calls the clansmen to a meeting the next morning. Okonkwo lies awake, thinking of his revenge. He hopes Umuofia will wage war on the intruders; if they don't, he will take action on his own. His anger turns on those who want to keep things peaceful instead of facing the need for war, even if it is a "war of blame."

For the meeting in the marketplace, people come from even the farthest villages, except those friendly with the white foreigners.

The first man to address the crowd is one of the leaders whom the Commissioner arrested. He calls for the village to take action against the unwanted strangers and rid themselves of the evil they have brought. He admits that the Umuofians may have to fight and kill members of their own clan.

Suddenly, five court messengers approach the group. Okonkwo jumps forward to stop them. The messenger in charge says that the white man has ordered the meeting stopped. Okonkwo takes out his machete and beheads the man. No one tries to stop the other mes-

sengers from escaping. The other clansmen are afraid, and someone asks "Why did he do it?" Seeing such inaction and fear, Okonkwo cleans his machete on the sand and walks away, realizing that his fellow Umuofians will never go to war.

Commentary

After Okonkwo is freed from prison, he remembers better times, when Umuofia was more warrior-like and fierce"when men were men." As in his younger days, he is eager to prepare for war (not unlike Enoch the convert in the preceding chapter). He is worried that the peacemakers among them may have a voice, but he assures himself that he will continue the resistance, even if he has to do it alone. He will be manly in his actions even to the end.

Umuofian culture has traditionally discriminated against women, *osu*, and other outcastsand currently against Christian converts. Through this discrimination, it has marginalized many people, including even important "sons" of Umuofia. The speaker points out that not "all the sons of Umuofia" are with them at the vital clan gathering. He admits they may have to kill their own clansmen if they go to war. Yet he feels they must do battle in order to rid themselves of this evil.

When Okonkwo kills the court messenger, his fellow clansmen almost literally back away from him in fear. In fact, his violent action is questioned. When he realizes that no one supports him, Okonkwo finally knows that he can't save his village and its traditions no matter how fiercely he tries. The Umuofia he has loved and honored is on the verge of surrender, and Okonkwo himself feels utterly defeated. Everything has fallen apart for him. His action in the final chapter will not be a surprise.

a "war of blame" In Chapter Two, it is stated that a "fight of blame" (which Okonkwo expects the peacemakers to label this fight against the strangers) would never be sanctioned by their Oracle, which approves only a "just war." Therefore, what Okonkwo is considering may go beyond even the clan's traditionsa fight for which they may not have full justification from their gods.

creepers plants with vines that spread along the ground, the walls, and the trees.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Summary

Following the killing of the messenger, the District Commissioner goes to Okonkwo's compound and, finding a small crowd, demands to see Okonkwo. Obierika repeatedly says that he is not there. When the Commissioner threatens the men, Obierika agrees to show him where Okonkwo is, expressing the hope that the Commissioner's men will help them.

Obierika leads the Commissioner and his men to an area behind the compound, where Okonkwo's body is hanging lifeless from a treea victim of suicide. Obierika asks the Commissioner if his men will cut Okonkwo down from the tree and bury him. According to tradition, the people of the clan cannot touch the body of a man who killed himself, since this is a sin against the earth. Obierika angrily accuses the Commissioner of having caused the death of his good friend. The Commissioner orders his men to take down the body and to bring it and the crowd to the court.

As the Commissioner leaves, he thinks about the book he is writing about his experiences in civilizing the people of Nigeria. It's possible that he will write a chapter, or perhaps an interesting paragraph, about the man who killed a messenger and then killed himself. His book will be titled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

Commentary

The book's final confrontation between the District Commissioner and the Umuofians is almost anti-climactic. It serves to demonstrate once more the deep cultural gulf between the

Europeans and the Igbos. This difference is dramatized not solely by the events, but also by the language of the chapter. For example, notice the sudden appearance of several literate words relating to the Commissioner throughout the scene: *infuriating, superfluous, instantaneously, resolute*. He imagines himself to be a "student of primitive customs," listening to the explanation of the "primitive belief" about handling the body of a suicide. His warning about the natives playing "monkey tricks" may reflect his views that they are, in fact, animalisticperhaps like primates in the wild.

In preparation for the final paragraph of the novel, Achebe dra-

matically shifts the narrative style from an omniscient, mostly objective point of view to the personal point of view of the District Commissioner, whose thoughts in the final paragraph become the final irony of the book: He sees himself as a benevolent ambassador to the nativesone who must maintain his dignity at all times in order to earn the favorable opinion of the natives. He prides himself on having spent many years toiling to bring "civilization to different parts of Africa," and he has "learned a number of things," allowing him the privilege of writing the definitive book on *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

"Primitive" is, of course, his British point of view. The Commissioner, like other colonialists, cannot imagine that he understands very little about the Igbo, especially that they are *not* primitiveexcept perhaps from a European technological perspective. In the meantime, the novel has revealed to its readers the complex system of justice, government, society, economy, religion, and even medicine in Umuofia before the British arrived.

Finally, the Commissioner seems unconcerned about the ironic fact that the colonialists' methods of "pacification" are often achieved through suppression and violencethemselves essentially primitive means for achieving nationalistic objectives.

superfluous extra, needless, excessive.

monkey tricks possibly a racial slur directed at the natives.

resolute determined, firmly set toward a goal.

abomination a despised and shameful act.

"Yes, sah" The meaning is obvious; the form may be pidgin English and illustrates how the native-born court messengers submitted to the orders of

their white bossesat least on the surface.

Critical Essays

Themes

To many writers, the theme of a novel is the driving force of the book during its creation. Even if the author doesn't consciously identify an intended theme, the creative process is directed by at least one controlling ideaa concept or principle or belief or pur-

pose significant to the author. That themeand there are often several themesguides the author, controlling where the story goes, what the characters do, what mood is portrayed, what style evolves, and what emotional effects it will create in the reader.

From Achebe's own statements, we know that one of his themes is the complexity of Igbo society before the arrival of the Europeans. To support this theme, he includes detailed descriptions of the codes of justice and the trial process, the social and family rituals, the marriage customs, food production and preparation processes, the process of shared leadership for the community, religious beliefs and practices, and the opportunities for virtually every man to climb the clan's ladder of success through his own efforts. The book might have been written more simply as a study of Okonkwo's deterioration in character in an increasingly unsympathetic and incompatible environment, but consider what would have been lost had Achebe not emphasized the theme of the complex and dynamic qualities of the Igbo in Umuofia.

Against Achebe's theme of Igbo cultural complexity is his theme of the clash of cultures. This collision of cultures occurs at both a personal and a societal level, and the cultural misunderstanding cuts both ways: Just as the uncompromising Reverend Smith views Africans as "heathens," the Igbo initially criticize the Christians and the missionaries as "foolish." For Achebe, the Africans' misperceptions of themselves and of Europeans need realignment as much as do the misperceptions of Africans by the West. Writing as an African who had been "Europeanized," Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* as "an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son." By his own act, he encourages

other Africans, especially those with Western educations, to realize they may misperceive their native culture.

Related to the theme of cultural clash is the issue of how much the flexibility or the rigidity of the characters (and by implication, of the British and Igbo) contribute to their destiny. Because of Okonkwo's inflexible nature, he seems destined for self-destruction, even before the arrival of the European colonizers. The arrival of a new culture only hastens Okonkwo's tragic fate.

Two other characters contrast with Okonkwo in this regard: Mr. Brown, the first missionary, and Obierika, Okonkwo's good friend. While Okonkwo is an unyielding man of action, the other two are

more open and adaptable men of thought. Mr. Brown wins converts by first respecting the traditions and beliefs of the Igbo and subsequently allowing some accommodation in the conversion process. Like Brown, Obierika is also a reasonable and thinking person. He does not advocate the use of force to counter the colonizers and the opposition. Rather, he has an open mind about changing values and foreign culture: "Who knows what may happen tomorrow?" he comments about the arrival of foreigners. Obierika's receptive and adaptable nature may be more representative of the spirit of Umuofia than Okonkwo's unquestioning rigidity.

As an example, consider Umuofia's initial lack of resistance to the establishment of a new religion in its midst. With all its deep roots in tribal heritage, it seems surprising how little the community takes a stand against the intrudersagainst new laws as well as new religion. What accounts for this lack of community opposition? Was Igbo society more receptive and adaptable than it appeared to be? The lack of strong initial resistance may also come from the fact that the Igbo society does not foster strong central leadership. While that quality encourages individual initiative toward recognition and achievement, it also limits timely decision-making and authority-backed actions needed on short notice to maintain its integrity and welfare. Whatever the reasonand it may have been a combination of these reasonsthe British culture and its code of behavior, ambitious for its goals of native "enlightenment" as well as of British self-enrichment, begin to encroach upon the existing Igbo culture and its corresponding code of behavior.

A factor that hastens the decline of the traditional Igbo society is

their custom of marginalizing some of their peopleallowing the existence of an outcast group, keeping women subservient in their household and community involvement, treating them as property, and accepting physical abuse of them somewhat lightly. When representatives of a foreign culture (beginning with Christian missionaries) enter Igbo territory and accept these marginalized people at their full human valueas they also accept twinsthe Igbo's traditional shared leadership finds itself with less of a population it can control. The lack of a clear, sustaining center of authority in Igbo society may be the quality that decided Achebe to draw his title from the Yeats poem, "The Second Coming." The key phrase of the poem reads: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold . . ."

Underlying both of the above cultural themes is a theme of fate, or destiny. This theme is also played at both individual and societal levels. In the story, we are frequently reminded about this theme in references to *chi*, the individual's personal god as well as his ultimate capability and destiny. Okonkwo, at his best, feels that his *chi* supports his ambition: "When a man says yes, his *chi* says yes also" (Chapter Four). At his worst, Okonkwo feels that his *chi* has let him down: His *chi* "was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi* . . . Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation" (Chapter Fourteen).

At the societal level, the Igbos' lack of a unifying self-image and centralized leadership as well as their weakness in the treatment of some of their own peopleboth discussed abovesuggest the inevitable "fate" of becoming victim to colonization by a power eager to exploit its resources.

In addition to the three themes discussed above, the thoughtful reader will probably be able to identify other themes in the novel: for example, the universality of human motives and emotions across cultures and time, and the need for balance between individual needs and community needs.

Language

Which Language? Writers in Third World countries that were formerly colonies of European nations debate among themselves about their duty to write in their native language rather than in the language of their former colonizer. Some of these writers argue that it is imperative they write in their native language because cultural subtleties and meanings are lost in translation. For these writers, a

"foreign" language can never fully describe their culture.

Achebe maintains the opposite view. In a 1966 essay reprinted in his book *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, he says that, by using English, he presents "a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language." He recommends that the African writer use English . . . in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. [The writer] should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience." Achebe accomplishes this goal by innovatively introducing Igbo language, proverbs, meta-

phors, speech rhythms, and ideas into an English-language novel.

Achebe agrees, however, with many of his fellow African writers on one point: The African writer must write for a social purpose. In contrast to Western writers and artists who create "art for art's sake," many African writers create works with one mission in mindto reestablish their own national culture in the post-colonial era. In a 1964 statement, also published in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Achebe comments that

> . . . African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans . . . their societies were not mindless, but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, . . . they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that African people all but lost during the colonial period, and it is this that they must now regain.

To further his aim of disseminating African works to a non-African audience, Achebe became the founding editor for a series on African literaturethe African Writers Seriesfor the publishing firm of Heinemann.

The Use of English. Achebe presents the complexities and depths of an African culture to readers of other cultures, as well as to readers of his own culture. By using Englishin which he has been proficient since childhoodhe reaches many more readers and has a much greater literary impact than he would by writing in a language such as Igbo. Those writers who write in their native language must eventually allow their works to be translated, often into English, so that readers outside the culture can learn about it.

Yet by using English, Achebe faces a problem. How can be present the African heritage and culture in a language that can never

describe it adequately? Indeed, one of the primary tasks of *Things Fall Apart* is to confront this lack of understanding between the Igbo culture and the colonialist culture. In the novel, the Igbo ask how the white man can call Igbo customs bad when he does not even speak the Igbo language. An understanding of Igbo culture can only be possible when the outsider can relate to the Igbo language and terminology.

Achebe solves this problem by incorporating elements of the Igbo language into his novel. By incorporating Igbo words, rhythms, language, and concepts into an English text about his culture, Achebe goes a long way to bridge a cultural divide.

The Igbo vocabulary is merged into the text almost seamlessly so that the reader understands the meaning of most Igbo words by their context. Can any attentive reader of *Things Fall Apart* remain unfamiliar with words and concepts represented by *chi, egwugwu, ogbanje*, and *obi*? Such Igbo terms as *chi* and *ogbanje* are essentially untranslatable; yet by using them in the context of his story, Achebe helps the non-Igbo reader identify with and relate to this complex Igbo culture.

Chi, for example, represents a significant, complex Igbo concept which Achebe repeatedly refers to, illustrating the concept in various contexts throughout the story. Achebe translates it as "personal god" when he first mentions Unoka's bad fortune. As the book progresses, it gradually picks up other nuances. As discussed in the Commentary section for Chapter Three, the *chi* concept is more complex than just a personal deity or even "fate," another frequently used synonym. It suggests elements of the Hindu concept of karma, of the concept of soul in some Christian denominations, and of the concept of individuality in some mystical philosophies. Our understanding of *chi* and its significance in Igbo culture grows as we progress through the book.

Another example of Achebe's incorporation of Igbo elements is his frequent reference to traditional Igbo proverbs and tales. These particular elements give *Things Fall Apart* an authentic African voice. The Igbo culture is fundamentally an oral onethat is, "Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Chapter One). It would be impossible to provide an authentic feel for Igbo culture without also allowing the proverbs to play a

significant role in the novel. And despite the foreign origin of these proverbs and tales, the Western reader can relate very well to many of them. They are woven smoothly into their context and require only occasional explanation or elaboration. These proverbs and tales are, in fact, quite similar in spirit to Western sayings and fables.

Modern-day readers of this novel not only relate easily to such traditional proverbs and tales, but also are ready to sympathize with the problems of Okonkwo, Nwoye, and other characters. Achebe has skillfully developed his characters so that, even though they live in a different era and a much different culture, we can readily understand their motivations and their feelings because they are universal and timeless.

Speech patterns and rhythms are occasionally used to represent moments of high emotion and tension. Consider the sound of the drums in the night in Chapter Thirteen (*go-di-di-go-go-di-go*); the call repeated several times to unite a gathering followed by its group response, first described in Chapter Two (*Umuofia kwenu . . . Yaa!*); the agonized call of the priestess seeking Ezinma in Chapter Eleven (*Agbala do-o-o-o!*); the repetitious pattern of questions and answers in the *isa-ifi* marriage ritual in Chapter Fourteen; the long narrated tale of Tortoise in Chapter Eleven; and the excerpts from songs in several chapters.

Achebe adds yet another twist in his creative use of language by incorporating a few examples of pidgin English. Pidgin is a simplified form of language used for communicating between groups of people who normally speak different languages. Achebe uses only a few pidgin words or phrases"tie-tie" (to tie); "kotma" (a crude form of "court messenger"); and "Yes, sah"just enough to suggest that a form of pidgin English was being established. As colonialists, the British were adept at installing pidgin English in their new colonies. Unfortunately, pidgin sometimes takes on characteristics of master-servant communication; it can sound patronizing on the one hand, and subservient on the other. Furthermore, it can become an easy excuse for not learning both standard languages for which it substitutes.

Achebe's use of Igbo language, speech patterns, proverbs, and richly drawn characters creates an authentic African story that effectively bridges the cultural and historical gap between the reader and the Igbo. *Things Fall Apart* is a groundbreaking work for many reasons, but particularly because Achebe's controlled use

of the Igbo language in an English novel extends the boundaries of what is considered English fiction. Achebe's introduction of new forms and language into a traditional (Western) narrative structure to communicate unique African experiences forever changed the definition of world literature.

Pronunciation of Igbo Names and Words. Like Chinese, the Igbo language is a tonal one; that is, differences in the actual voice pitch and the rise or fall of a word or phrase can produce different meanings. In Chapter Sixteen, for example, Achebe describes how the missionary's translator, although an Igbo, could not pronounce the Mbanta Igbo dialect: "Instead of saying 'myself' he

always said 'my buttocks.'" (The form "Íké" means "strength" while "Íkè" means "buttocks.")

Igbo names usually have meanings, often entire ideas, represented by them. Some names reflect the qualities a child's parent wishes to bestow on the child; for example, Ikemefuna means "My power should not be dispersed." Other names reflect the time, area, or other circumstances in which a child is born; for example, Okoye means "Man born on Oye Day," the second day of the Igbo week. And Igbo parents also give names to honor someone or something else; for instance, Nneka means "Mother is Supreme."

Prior to Nigerian independence in 1960, the spelling of Igbo words was not standardized. Thus the word "Igbo" is written as "Ibo," its pre-1960 spelling throughout *Things Fall Apart*. The new spellings reflect a more accurate understanding and pronunciation of Igbo words. The List of Characters includes a pronunciation guide for most of the main characters' names, using equivalent English syllables.

The Sequel to Things Fall Apart

Achebe originally envisioned three novels about the Okonkwo clan, each story dealing with a single generation. However, Achebe completed only two novels about the family, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960). The second book not only carries us forward in the lives of characters from the first book, but it also deepens our understanding of Achebe's views about colonialism and its undermining of Nigerian culture.

The setting of *No Longer at Ease* is 1950s Nigeria, a country looking toward independence in 1960 (the year the novel was

published). Educated Nigerians are being groomed for political and government positions. The novel focuses on Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of the protagonist in *Things Fall Apart* and the son of Isaac (Nwoye) Okonkwo. Obi descends from a life of great promise and aspiration into a life without integrity or commitment. While the need for money and its illegal gain are the tangible causes of his downfall, the roots of his deterioration and imperfect character go much deeper, just as they did for his grandfather. Obi is caught between several incompatible sets of values and standardsthose of his native Igbo culture, those of his English education, and those of the Lagos ways of doing business.

No Longer at Ease begins and ends with Obi's trial for taking bribes as a Nigerian civil servant. Most of the novel is presented between those trial scenes as a flashback, which takes the reader on the path with Obifrom being the "favorite son" of all Umuofia, to his education in England, to his return to Lagos, the capital of Nigeria, where he becomes a respected and responsible government employee. As a civil servant with increasing personal and financial obligations, he ultimately surrenders to the temptations of bribes for favors in his day-to-day job.

Obi's excellent grades at the Umuofian missionary school earn him a scholarship to a British university. Actually, it is more like a loan: The Umuofian clan loans money to its brightest students so they can go abroad for university studies; the clan expects to be repaid when these students have secured prestigious government jobs after graduation. Obi, the first beneficiary of such a scholarship, is also expected to secure coveted government jobs for other Umuofians.

On the ship from England to Nigeria after his graduation, Obi falls in love with Clara, who hesitates becoming engaged. After they arrive in Lagos with the possibility of visiting Obi's family, Clara confesses that she is an *osu*, an outcast in Igbo society. Igbo religion and traditions forbid the two of them from marrying.

Even early in his civil service career in Lagos, Obi experiences substantial financial burdens. Besides having to repay his loans to the clan, he must support his parents and pay for his brother's education. He is also expected to maintain the lifestyle of a relatively high-ranking government employee, complete with car and servant. He is expected to keep up appearances not only for his colleagues, but also for the prestige of his clan. He borrows more

and more money to meet his financial obligations.

In the meantime, Obi's parents forbid him to marry an outcast. His mother threatens to die if he marries Clara, while his father fears the social impact of the marriage, for it would place the couple and their children outside proper Igbo society. It is ironic that the rebel against tradition in *Things Fall Apart* (Nwoye) who became a devout Christian (Isaac) has now become a defender of Igbo tradition. For him, the social outcome of such a marriage seems more important than religious debates about the *osu* as people. Isaac thus appears less "Christian" than what the reader might have expected.

His attitude is analogous to that of people today who claim to have no racial prejudice, but who are against interracial marriages on grounds that such marriages upset the order of things and produce negative consequences for the couple and their children.

Matters become even more complicated for Obi when Clara becomes pregnant with his child. He renews his desire to marry her despite objections from his family and clan. In the end, he pays for her abortion, and their relationship deteriorates afterward.

As Obi lets his moral judgment slip regarding Clara, the marriage, and the abortion, he begins to accept bribes. He takes money from students applying for government scholarships to help improve their chances before the scholarship committee. He has sex with a female applicant who needs his help for a scholarship. His reputation as a man who accepts bribes grows, but he is not adept at bribe-taking. In the end, his carelessness leads the police to set him up for an arrest.

No Longer at Ease, like *Things Fall Apart*, is first and foremost a critique of the impact of British colonialization on Nigerian culture. Modern Nigeria is seemingly a combination of the worst aspects of traditional Nigerian culture coupled with the worst elements of Western society. The slums, filth, and corruption in Lagos are presented as appalling results of colonialism. Industrialization and bureaucratic corruption are possible only because of Westernization. Ironically, the British are particularly disdainful of corrupt Nigerian civil servants. Despite his so-called liberal politics, Obi's boss, Mr. Green, thinks that all Africans are fundamentally corrupt. On the other hand, Obi's fellow Umuofians find no ethical problems with taking bribes because corruption is

their only way of truly getting ahead in a restrictive colonial system. His fellow clansmen see fault only in Obi's inexperience and clumsiness in bribe-taking. They even pay for Obi's lawyer.

The plot of *No Longer at Ease* progresses through a series of journeys which represent metaphorical journeys, as well as physical journeys. Each of Obi's voyages changes him, as they also change the reader's understanding of both Igbo and British colonial cultures.

His first journey is to England, where he develops high ideals as well as a nostalgic and unrealistic image of his homeland. He is quickly disillusioned upon his return to Lagos, where he soon realizes he will never be able to lead his countrymen away from corrup-

tion. Witnessing bribery on his trip back to Umuofia, he wonders if true democracy can really be achieved in Nigeria. In Umuofia, Obi begins to feel alienated from his family and fellow clansmen, inventing excuses and lies to please them. Back in Lagos, Obi indulges in a lifestyle associated with a "European" job. Indeed, for Nigerians, occupying a "European post" was second only to actually being a European.

Obi's corruption begins not by taking bribes, but by indulging in an affluent lifestyle incompatible with his financial status. He cheats on Clara by dating an Irish woman, who is a teacher. He begins to condone and even admire the corrupt politician Sam Okoli. On his second trip back to Umuofia, his alienation from his family becomes complete, and the return trip to Lagos completes his journey to weakness and immorality. He learns Clara is pregnant, but is not concerned initially with the impact an illegal abortion might have on Clara and her health. His primary concern is about the financial cost of an abortion. The step he now takes to become a bribe-taker is a small one, for he is already morally bankrupt.

Rejecting traditional Igbo morality and yet unable to lead the life of an upstanding European bureaucrat, Obi is caught between two cultures and left without standards and virtues from either one. Thus a modern tragic hero emerges from this clash of cultures.

Review Questions and Essay Topics

(1). Discuss the character and personality of Okonkwo.

(2). Achebe once remarked that Okonkwo is not a typical Igbo. In

what ways do you agree or disagree with this statement?

(3). What is the significance of Nwoye's Christian name *Isaac*?

(4). At what stage in the novel can you foresee that Umuofia is doomed to fall apart? What is your evidence?

(5). Describe the gradual takeover of Umuofia by the British.

(6). Discuss the differences between Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith. Which do you think contributes more toward the downfall of Umuofia? Explain why.

(7). In what ways does Achebe remind the reader that the feminine qualities of Igbo culture are important to its survival?

(8). The focus of the novel is not native to African culture. Yet Achebe successfully uses it to relate the African experience to a worldwide audience. How does he employ a Western art form to tell an African story?

(9). Critics have suggested that *Things Fall Apart* is a universal story. Do the themes, problems, and concerns of Okonkwo and Nwoye reflect situations people in other cultures face? Explain your answer.

(10). Who are the people whom Achebe is criticizing in *Things Fall Apart*?

(11). Can you guess Achebe's philosophy of life from *Things Fall Apart*? Explain.

(12). Discuss the character of Nwoye in *Things Fall Apart* and in *No Longer at Ease*. In what ways does Nwoye change?

(13). Which aspects of Igbo tradition do you find most surprising? Most interesting? Why?

(14). In your opinion, what contributes most to "things falling apart" in Umuofia? Explain.

(15). In your opinion, what contributes most to the final tragedy of Okonkwo? Explain. What might have prevented this?

(16). What is your reaction to the role and treatment of women in Igbo society? In what ways does that contribute to "things falling apart"? Explain.

(17). To which character are you most sympathetic? Why? What would you like to see happen to this character?

(18). Achebe originally planned a novel to take place between *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. If a book were to be

written about this interval, who would you like to see again as characters? What kinds of events would you like to read about in the book? Explain.

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