

1990

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Ernest N. Emenyonu

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### Recommended Citation

Emenyonu, Ernest N., Chinua Ache be's Things Fall Apart: A Classic Study in Colonial Diplomatic Tactlessness, *Kunapipi*, 12(2), 1990.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol12/iss2/11>

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### Abstract

Does the white man understand our custom about land?' 'How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."

## Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Classic Study in Colonial Diplomatic Tactlessness

'Does the white man understand our custom about land?'

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Very often the novel, *Things Fall Apart* is seen as a classic study in character – the complex character of the hero, Okonkwo, memorable and indelible, in much the same way as Thomas Hardy's Michael Henchard or Shakespeare's King Lear. The perspective emphasizes Okonkwo's inflexibility, his stubborn individualism, his resistance to change and his perfect role as a clog in the wheel of inevitable progress. His death, therefore, had to be, if Christianity and Western civilization must permeate the 'dark continent'. The colonial over-lord is exonerated. The die-hard, one-track-minded missionary would deserve praise for being the link through which Western European techniques reached the Africans in a way that made sense and in an atmosphere of mutual trust.

This approach misses the real universal significance of *Things Fall Apart* as world literature. Written and published when most of Africa was still under colonial rule, the political intentions of the novel must be appreciated. An over-concentration on the character analysis of Okonkwo, indomitable as Okonkwo may be as a hero, diminishes the cultural anguish of the Africans at the time which Achebe meant to portray in all its ramifications. No matter how couched in proverbs, images and innuendoes, the intense virulence of Achebe's indictment of colonial diplomatic tactlessness and absurd human high-handedness

cannot be lost to the perceptive reader. And often Achebe is not that soft-spoken as the opening quote above amply illustrates. Okonkwo's heroism pales in the light of the systematic emasculation of the entire culture of his people. No matter how irresistible the urge, the crude decimation of Okonkwo's seeming larger-than-life posture must not be seen as the central concern of the author of *Things Fall Apart*. For, *Things Fall Apart* is indeed a classic study of cross-cultural misunderstanding and the consequences to the rest of humanity, when a belligerent culture or civilization, out of sheer arrogance and ethnocentrism, takes it upon itself to invade another culture, another civilization. Seen from this perspective, the lesson of *Things Fall Apart* comes across clearly as the unique manifestation of human blindness and blissful ignorance at a point in time. The actual truth is that those who suffered blindness and folly were not the dwellers of the 'Dark Continent', but those who came with 'light' on a civilizing mission.

*Things Fall Apart* is built on a rising structure of cross-cultural conflicts. Each conflict cuts into, and does damage to the edifice. By the time it reaches the final act, the collapse has already been assured. It should be clear to the reader before he gets to the final scene, that even if Okonkwo had not killed the white man's messenger, the stability of Umuofia's socio-political and cultural structure had been so consistently and pervasively eroded that it was bound to collapse. Okonkwo's act merely gave a final push to an already tottering structure. Even this fatal act must not be seen purely in terms of the colonial master's symbolic blindness and perennial error of judgement in human relations: Rather the disintegration and concomitant tragedy must be perceived in terms which reach beyond the life of a small Igbo community and the domain of one man's life. Achebe's preoccupation was with the fate and destiny of a large section of humanity and not necessarily the rise and fall of one man, his towering personality notwithstanding, or, for that matter, one culture, its immediate disaster and predicament notwithstanding either. The immediate setting acquires allegorical dimensions when viewed from this point of view.

The story of the novel is set in Igboland at the turn of the 20th century when the early Europeans were coming into that part of Nigeria for the first time. The indigenes of the land are set in their ways, including their religious life and beliefs.

There is an established order in social relationships. Devotion to gods and ancestors is taken for granted and compliance is expected of every adult member of the society. The wishes of the gods are made known to the public by special agencies known as *Oracles* and *Diviners*. So absolute was the belief in the inscrutability of the gods that no one dared question the decree of the gods as pronounced by the high priests, even

if this meant an order to throw away one's twin babies or sacrifice (murder) one's own son. The Christian missionaries who arrive and settle among the Igbo have come primarily to convert the people from their old ways and religious beliefs and practices, not through persuasion, but by sheer force of an obtrusive dogma. The colonial administrators, known as District Officers (Commissioners), have also come to colonize and secure the Igbo territories for the British Government. Traditionally, the Igbo do not part with their land on a permanent basis to strangers. The two divergent groups (the Igbo and the European), meeting for the first time deeply resent and mistrust each other. The Igbo find the blundering, indiscrete white man irritatingly amusing. They do not understand why or how strangers could audaciously interfere with the way of life of their hosts to the point of meddling with such sacred things as their (the Igbo) freedom to worship the gods of their land or pay homage to their protective ancestors. The Igbo are well known for their hospitality and effusive generosity to strangers in their midst, but a stranger who turns unbearably presumptuous and arrogantly insulting automatically forfeits his welcome. (The Igbo have an adage which invokes the disease of hunch-back for the discourteous guest on his way home!) The stranger at this point is advised to remove himself from the vicinity or he is thrown out if he appears recalcitrant. An Igbo novel, *Omenuko*<sup>2</sup> by Pita Nwana which was published in 1933, twenty-five years before *Things Fall Apart*, is a good illustration of this Igbo philosophy of co-existence.

As a people the Igbo are hard-working and dynamic. They depend on the land for their subsistence. They toil to cultivate the land in order to feed their families from one planting season to another. In effect they revere the land and the earth goddess is placated and appeased frequently to maintain the harmonious relationship necessary to ensure good harvests. The culture placed emphasis on hard work and personal achievements; among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father... Age was respected ... but achievement was revered' (p. 6). This is still very much true of the Igbo today. In the society of the novel, a man established his worth by the size of his barns, the number of wives he had, and the number of human heads he brought home from war. These are the distinctions possessed by Okonkwo at the beginning of the novel. He was, therefore, a visible symbol of the standards by which success was measured and attained in his society. His degradation at the hands of the white colonialists was a source of irreparable disharmony in social relations between the strangers and the hosts.

The Christian religion also ran into conflict with the traditional culture in the concept and status of social classes. Whereas the traditional

society excluded the so-called 'low-born and outcasts' (the slaves and the *Osu*) from communicating socially, politically, and religiously with the free-born (*diala*), the new Christian religion did not discriminate between people. When the free-born who joined the Church started mixing freely with the outcasts who formed the bulk of the congregation in those days, it was seen by the elders as an abomination and they lamented that 'The church had come and led many astray. Not only the low-born and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it' (p. 123). This reference was to Ogbuefi Ugonna who, being a titled man and well respected in the village, 'had cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the Christians' (p. 123).

In the novel we see the Igbo as a people without kings or Chiefs, yet they operated a highly efficient democratic government. The government was through the cultural and traditional Council of Elders (*Ndichie*), Council of Masquerades (*Egwugwu*), the Oracles and their Chief Priests who were the liaison between the people and the gods. The traditional government had a set of rules and law which must be obeyed by all. The Council of Masquerades was presided over by the 'Evil Forest', the leader of Umuofia. They tried cases and inflicted punishments. The law of the land was no respecter of persons as was the case with Okonkwo who, himself a titled man, was fined for beating his wife during the Week of Peace. The following verdict by Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess, on Okonkwo's crime is an example: "'You will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries'" (p. 22). These were for appeasing the gods. For more serious offences like murder, the offender was required to go into exile for a period of seven years, as in the case of Okonkwo who fled to Mbanta.

The coming of the white man with his government disrupted this age-long tradition and there was a great conflict between the new and the old order. The white man established his own court which was presided over by the District Commissioner. The District Commissioners were said to have 'judged cases in ignorance' because they were foreigners and did not know the customs of the people especially in land disputes. The Court Messengers, who were agents of the District Commissioners, were disliked also because they were strangers. They came from Umuru which was regarded as a foreign land. Obierika described them as 'arrogant and high-handed'. The white man had no regard for Umuofia titled men and they, in turn, did not recognise the white man's brutal government. The white man had two major types of punishment. For minor offences the people were flogged and in murder cases the offenders were hanged. In the traditional system these required only sacrifices to appease the gods or exile in cases involving

killing or spilling of human blood. On the new judicial system Obierika tells Okonkwo, "I told you on my last visit to Mbanta how they hanged Aneto" (p. 124). Aneto had killed Oduche and fled the village as required by custom. The court Messengers, however, arrested him and he was hanged at Umuru. Hanging was seen as an abomination and was abhorred by the people, while the white man regarded it as a legal act.

There was also a lack of social interaction between the foreigner (the white man, the court messengers and the interpreters) and the people. There was complete lack of trust between the two groups. The white man was said to be ignorant and did not speak the native language and so was unable to understand or learn the culture of the people. The messengers were ridiculed as well. The special prejudice is clearly seen in the song by the prisoners:

Kotma of the ash buttocks,  
He is fit to be a slave  
The white man has no sense,  
He is fit to be a slave (p. 123)

This song shows nothing but the hatred the people had for the 'foreigner'. The white man, on the other hand, said that the customs of the people were bad. The new converts agreed with the white man but the rest of the people did not see anything bad in their culture. However, the new religion badly weakened the traditions and customs of the people. From every indication it destroyed total unity among the people and they could no longer fight a common enemy as before. This was the greatest harm done to the Igbo society by the white man as portrayed in the novel. It was contrary to the Igbo culture to yield to invaders (which the white men were). The duty of fighting Christianity by Okonkwo became impossible when some of the people joined the new religion prompting Obierika to ask: "How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us?" (p. 124). It is in this sense that the novel *Things Fall Apart* can be seen as an African classic, a story which transcends time and place. The universality of its thematic preoccupation as a study in colonial diplomatic blunder must not be missed by the perceptive reader.

## NOTES

1. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, African Writers Series, 1977), pp. 124-5. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Nwana Pita, *Omenaka* (London: Longman, 1933).