

TEACHING WORLD HISTORY WITH *THINGS FALL APART*

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Chinua Achebe's masterful tale *Things Fall Apart* is a useful collateral reading assignment in a high school or college world history class. It can expand and personalize students' understanding of traditional African culture, the African perspective on the late-nineteenth-century imperialism, and disorder in contemporary Africa. It provides good topics for analytical papers and generates enthusiastic class discussion.

Many American students, even African-American ones, quite reasonably bring to their study of history an essentially Western, progressive point of view. In studying traditional non-Western cultures and the Western penetration of the rest of the world, some students assume that the traditional and less complex cultures that were destroyed or radically changed were worth little and that Westernization has equaled "progress." In contrast, other students see non-Western cultures as the idyllic and pure victims of a corrupt West. A study of *Things Fall Apart* tends to replace simplistic and abstract concepts with those that are more complex and concrete. In the novel, the fictionalized Igbo, or Ibo, of west Africa have a society that is orderly and stable and an economy and a culture that are in harmony with their natural environment. Students generally come to recognize that, even with its faults, traditional Igbo society was an admirable human creation and its collapse appears lamentable, if still inevitable.

Things Fall Apart has other positive characteristics as a teaching tool. It is short. First published in 1958, the recent paperback Heinemann African Writers Series edition has 148 pages of text.¹ Because Chinua Achebe has a graceful style and writes in English, *Things Fall Apart* is easier to read than the usual excerpts of historical documents that sometimes have been awkwardly translated. Its shortness and readability mean that students will usually actually read it. Having read it, they are better prepared to write thoughtful analyses of it. Having a classroom full of students who have read, thought about, and written on the topic of *Things Fall Apart* leads to enthusiastic class discussion.

Papers

Things Fall Apart can be fitted into a syllabus at the beginning or end of the time allotted to late-nineteenth-century imperialism. Monday is the best day for me and my students because the weekend provides a block of time for reading, considering, and writing.

¹Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, African Writers Series (Halley Court, Jordan Hill, Oxford, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, 1986). This edition costs \$5.95; ISBN 0-435-90526-0.

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On the day scheduled for discussion, students turn in papers they have written. The assigned topic can vary. The most general, following a basic theme in African literature first developed in English in this novel,² is "Cultural Collision in *Things Fall Apart*." Requirements for the paper include a description of Igbo society before the appearance of Europeans, a description of the cultural conflict, an analysis of the reasons "things fall apart," and conclusions drawn about African societies of the late 1800s and the effects of imperialism. If the clearly defined format seems unduly restrictive to some creative students, they may approach the writing assignment differently if they first discuss their plans with me.

Students write between three and five double-spaced typed pages and illustrate points with brief quotations from the book, indicating page numbers in parentheses. In grading these papers I try to work quickly because students want to see how their papers fit into the pattern of recently completed discussion. Also, if ideas surface in discussion that students have not presented or, worse still, have countered, some become anxious over their performances. It is usually the case that if students receive graded papers soon after discussion, they are more likely to read and respond to my comments and continue thinking about the issues that have been raised.

Discussion

Because students have usually just completed the papers, the material is quite fresh and they are interested in discussing it. (Any student who comes to class without a paper is dismissed for the day because allowing him to write the paper after hearing the class discussion would be unfair.) As soon as students have turned in their papers, the class discussion begins. One trick I have learned is to leave my usual place at the lectern and sit in a student desk on the side of the classroom. I tell the class I am purposefully changing the "power dynamic" of the classroom to place the burden of discussion on them. They respond a bit nervously, but they accept the challenge, and my position at the side causes them to shift in their seats so that on their own they have turned more toward each other and are sitting more as an informal group than in their usual neat rows facing forward.

On the board I write a quotation from Achebe that provides a starting point, general focus, and conclusion for the discussion:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them . . . their societies were not mindless but frequently had a

²Kate Turkington, *Chinua Achebe: Things Fall Apart*, Studies in English Literature, ed. David Daiches, no. 66 (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 31. This brief study is extremely useful in preparing to teach Achebe's novel.

philosophy of great depth and value and beauty . . . they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity.³

We begin discussion by setting the novel in space and time and tying it to historical events. *Things Fall Apart* takes place in Igboland in what is today eastern Nigeria, just before and after the arrival of the British at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The murder of a white missionary and British military action that follows in 1905 provide a historical parallel for the events of the novel.⁴ The main character is a successful yet deeply flawed man named Okonkwo, whom we discuss, while concentrating on the tribe, its characteristics, and the eventual destruction of its culture.

The quotation on the chalkboard facilitates an assessment of the book's purpose. Chinua Achebe is attempting to give an authentic picture of the value and beauty of traditional Igbo life. He describes a unique and vital society with a clear identity, a society with a shared vision of life that has been reinforced through the inheritance of tribal wisdom and experience.⁵ Achebe acts as a "heroic poet": He defines the African past to re-instill pride in African people and give them back their strength, dignity, and identity. In working toward this goal, he also shows non-Africans these qualities of traditional African tribal society and opens their eyes to arrogant Western destructiveness.⁶

Students catalog the positive qualities of traditional tribal society. A primary value is kinship, which provides security and stability and represents strong community values as opposed to Western individualism.⁷ This traditional society balances materialism, defined as masculine, and spirituality, seen as feminine.⁸ It is close to the earth, vibrates with the rhythms of nature, and provides through its nature-based religion a sense of universal harmony.

At this point, students often compare African societies in general with traditional Asian civilizations. Particularly they note the importance of the community in the societies we study in east and south Asia and the animistic qualities of religions in China and Japan. The balance between masculine and feminine qualities calls to mind the concepts of *yang* and *yin*.

³Chinua Achebe, quoted in Turkington, 7, 24.

⁴Turkington, 7.

⁵Turkington, 7.

⁶Turkington, 8.

⁷Turkington, 18.

⁸Turkington, 13.

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Yet the students recognize, as Achebe wants them to, that traditional tribal society was far from an idyll of perfection. What horrifies most of them is twin infanticide. They find it hard to reconcile their respect for individual human life, basic to their own concept of natural order, with the Igbo's belief that twin births were an unnatural occurrence and that twins must be abandoned in the Evil Forest. (One class member, after a recent discussion, shared a somewhat ironic news item that *Twins Magazine* was investigating a common belief that a diet rich in yams, the Igbo's staple food, encouraged multiple births.⁹) The mutilation of bodies of infants or children who have died, done by the Igbos to keep the spirits of those children from returning to cause more grief, also seems to students to be incredibly superstitious and wicked. Polygyny raises a few eyebrows, but feminists are appalled at the submission of women, the purchase of brides, and the level of acceptable violence of husbands toward wives.

Students are interested in the administration of tribal justice. The abhorrence of suicide and the tribal council's settling of issues of domestic violence and marital separation seem wise and just to them. The peaceful settlement of inter-village disputes, one of the book's central issues, is quite another matter. A village compensates for the murder of an outsider's young wife by giving up one of its own young females and a boy. Students accept the first part of this deal but reject the decree of the oracle of the earth goddess that the boy, a sympathetic character whom they have gotten to know through the tale, has to die to balance the earlier murder. The discussion broadens here to comparisons with other concepts of justice through history and today. At this point, the instructor must try to let each make his point and defend his position, make some generalizations about cultural relativism and human absolutes—no mean feat!—and then return to the book and the Igbos.

After the long first section of the novel, missionaries arrive and the book rapidly builds toward its climax. The missionaries introduce a cultural conflict and the traditional balance between the material and spiritual world is lost. The whites bring trade, which makes the Igbos richer but more materialistic, and the missionaries cast doubt on tribal religious truth.¹⁰ The tolerant Igbos grant the missionaries some cursed land in the Evil Forest—a bit of a joke that the students appreciate—to use to build a mission. Some Igbos, generally the disrespected and unsuccessful, and in one pathetic instance the mother of several sets of twins, convert to the new religion. These outcasts include the protagonist Okonkwo's son, who has become deeply alienated from both his father and his culture after Okonkwo fulfilled the oracle's demand in killing the foster son.

Okonkwo, who has been in exile for accidentally killing a fellow tribesman, returns to see great and dangerous change and tries to force his people to reject the outsiders through a violent uprising. Okonkwo kills an Englishman to incite his people to collective action. The death of the white man brings on the "pacification" of his tribe by British

⁹USA Today, 26 October 1993, D1.

¹⁰Turkington, 13.

soldiers and administrators.¹¹ His people's unwillingness to join his violence brings on Okonkwo's suicide, which foreshadows the death of his tribe's traditional life.

At this point, the class begins to consider why the entry of Westerners brings death and destruction to the Igbo tribe. This is the most difficult part for students. They suggest the importance of superior military technology, certainly important in general, but only indirectly in evidence in the book, which uses religion as the agent of cultural breakdown. They will point out the perceived flaws in Igbo society, but then recognize that the triumphant West was also flawed. Some students will argue that Christianity is a superior religion, and that its effects are benign and progressive. Others will note that religion is so basic to culture that a major change in religion inevitably alters the culture.

There is also the "give 'em an inch and they'll take a mile" argument. In a tightly structured traditional society, a crack becomes a chasm and, once started, the breakdown can neither be stopped nor reversed. Whether the response is Okonkwo's inflexible opposition to all change or the other Igbos' confident and generous compromise, the result is the same destruction of traditional unity.¹²

Our discussion centers on the Igbo, but students are interested in the protagonist Okonkwo and the relationship of his story to that of the tribe. Okonkwo's father has been a poor debtor who dies without tribal titles or respect. Okonkwo has rejected all that his father has been and works for wealth and titles. He is out of balance. He is too materialistic and lacking in spirituality, which leads him to violate a taboo by beating his wife during a time in which all violence is forbidden and participating actively in the death of his foster son instead of passively accepting the oracle's decree that he must die.

When faced with the incursions of the whites, Okonkwo sees tribal toleration and flexibility as examples of the weakness he hated in his father, and his killing of the Englishman—which does not rouse the tribe to war—leads to his suicide just as the tribe's loss of its balance brings about its cultural destruction. *Things Fall Apart* is a tragedy, and both Okonkwo and the tribe are tragically heroic.¹³ In historical terms, students see that traditional cultures, whether they fought or compromised, were hard pressed to resist rapid cultural change, especially that which was backed up with the guns of "pacification."

Before concluding the discussion, students assess Achebe's view of the Europeans. He does not make them out to be complete villains or monsters but shows that they are completely unaware of the possibility of a relationship of mutual cultural respect. Students quickly recall the concept of the "White Man's Burden" and recognize the British imperialists as arrogant true believers in the superiority of Western civilization and the

¹¹Achebe, 148.

¹²Turkington, 23, 33.

¹³Turkington, 25, 45.

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correctness of Western power. The Europeans imposed their own structures and culture and thought they were doing good.¹⁴

Finally, we conclude that the Igbo had an ordered and dignified culture, which in a number of important ways violated our Western ideas of justice, but which functioned successfully. We conclude that the idea of progress, technological advances, and competitive nationalism, all of which we have just studied, justified, enabled, and impelled the European thrust into the world's traditional societies in the late nineteenth century.

Value of *Things Fall Apart* in World History

After reading, writing about, and discussing *Things Fall Apart*, students relate more personally and with greater interest in readings and lectures on imperialism both in Africa and in southeast Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They respond with greater interest to the movements of African nationalism and recognize more clearly the challenges Africa faces in modernization, and especially in democratization, a century later. The Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970, in which more than a million Igbos died in attempting to establish their own tribal-national state, becomes a continuation of the events of *Things Fall Apart* rather than just an example of general African nationalistic struggle to some of them. Chinua Achebe's siding with the Igbo in this struggle and suffering as a result gives a human dimension to this conflict as well.¹⁵ The violence and disorder of Africa today seems largely the result of Western destruction of traditional society and culture.

Another assignment of an excerpt of Mohandas Gandhi's "Hind Swaraj," in which Gandhi contrasts the positive spirituality of traditional India with the negative materialism and disorder of the West, ties the values of Asia to those of pre-imperial Africa for the students. Achebe's use of the phrase "things fall apart" from William Butler Yeats's "The Second Coming," a poem students often know from English literature studies and which we read in connection with post-World War I intellectual and cultural anxiety in the West, helps students to understand that Western civilizations also face conflict when historical forces and events challenge their basic cultural assumptions.

¹⁴Turkington, 24.

¹⁵Karen J. Winkler, "An African Writer at a Crossroads," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 January 1994, A9.