

## **Igbo Society in *Things Fall Apart***

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### **Abstract**

The Igbo are the second largest group of people living in Southern Nigeria. They are socially and culturally diverse, consisting of many subgroups. Although they live in scattered groups of village, they all speak one language. They have no common traditional story of their origins. *Things Fall Apart* highlighting certain African cultural practices before, during and after the arrival of the Europeans. This work is particularly important for both the marking and making of the first decade of decolonization. It represents a portrayal of the natives that rather deforms their morality, obligation and discipline.

**Key words:** Igbo Society, Colonization, White Missionaries

### **Introduction**

In the writing of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe describes the history of Igbo by describing both the perfections and imperfections of their culture and traditions that mode different from western cultures. In the novel, the reader is also made aware of the arrival of white missionaries in Umuofia as well as the reactions of Igbo to their arrival. Although the arrival of the missionaries had some benefits to Igbo, there were also a number of challenges that faced the future of Igbo.

Achebe's main concern in two of his publications namely *Things Fall Apart* and the *Arrow of God*. Seems to be the introduction of a new religion as well as its destructiveness in society. In this novel the people of Umuofia are separated in to two groups immediately following the arrival of the white missionaries in their land. The first group of people are Igbo followers and the second group of people are followers of the white missionaries.

*Things Fall Apart* is all about collapse, breaking into pieces, chaos and confusion of traditional Igbo culture that suffers at the hand of the white man's arrival in Umuofia along

with his religion. The views about life that the white men have are totally different from the views that the Igbo have.

What seems utterly appropriate and acceptable in traditional Igbo culture does not appear so to the white missionaries? They are quick to want to change certain elements of traditional Igbo culture that according to them are inappropriate and unacceptable elements of traditional Igbo culture are what keep the Igbo together and at peace with each other.

For instance, in traditional Igbo culture it is required for a real man to wed two or more wives. The women of the clan are aware of this and have accepted this ritual, in some cases the first wife can ever suggest to her husband to look for a younger wife. The younger wives are also expected to respect the first wife. These women along with their husbands live together in peace and help each other with taking care of the children and other house hold chores. However, the white missionaries are against polygamous marriages, based on some scriptures found in the New Testament the forbid Christians against such as act.

Another example is that in Igbo culture the killing of children or persons is a normal practice, as long as the reasons of the kill are in line with the practices of their religion for instances, Igbo religion says that twins must be killed because they are a sign of the work of the devil, small boys should be sacrificed to the Gods as a sign of peace offerings, and so forth. However, the fifth commandment teaches believes that only God has the power and authority to decide. When the life of man shall end and nobody else.

Most of the text in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* chiefly feature in the use and explanations of the complicated Igbo myths and proverbs that the Europeans fall to acknowledge. Through the use of proverbs is very important in conversations as the Igbo believe them to be a fountain of wisdom and of respect.

From the onset of the novel Achebe make readers aware of the importance of proverbs in conversation. When Okoye says Unoko a visit to ask him to settle his debt, and although Unoko is late with the overdue debt. Rather, the neighbours share a Kolo nut, give thanks unto the ancestors and then go on to discuss the debt by speaking in proverbs. This maintains good reactions between the two neighbours even though they are discussing such an issue that usually causes conflicts between people.

The difference between Achebe's novel and other colonial novels is that his novel thoroughly examines Igbo society as he portrays them in a manner in which shows all aspects of Igbo culture and not only the desirable aspects of their culture. He also predicts of the future of Igbo and where they are headed if the white missionaries are to be successful in taking control of Umuofia.

With the use of the English language, Achebe is successful in fully detailing the life of Okonkwo who at the beginning of the novel is a very famous young man in all the nine villages of Umuofia. However, as the novel develops and white missionaries begin arriving in Umuofia along with their government and institution, Okonkwo who tries to protest the change is in the end buried without respect or dignity and his fame is soon forgotten because of the greatest sin in Igbo religion that he commits by taking away his own life.

One of the main reasons that *Things Fall Apart* was successful is because of its detailed descriptiveness of Igbo culture as seen from the perspective of its author, who had an insider outsider position as a result of being raised in a Christian household, and other meant that he was not allowed to participate in traditional Igbo rituals although he was Igbo.

The title *Things Fall Apart* was adopted from W. B Yeats' poem *The Second Coming*. *Things Fall Apart* is centred on the life of the protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo. As the novel develops Okonkwo accidentally kills a man and he and his family are exiled from Umuofia. During his exile, white missionaries arrive in Umuofia and change the village when Okonkwo returns to his village he sees the major transformations that Umuofia has undergone during his exile.

Unhappy with the change, Okonkwo and other villagers come together to drive the white missionaries out of their land. Their efforts are in vain as the missionaries send their messengers to abort the meeting. Okonkwo kills one of the messengers and in shock at his actions the villagers let the other messengers escape. The messengers report back to the missionaries and they take off to bring Okonkwo to justice only to find him dead.

The Europeans held a Eurocentric view of the world; firmly believing European culture to be superior. Euro centrism has racist tendencies which granted an inferior status to the non- whites in order to give his people back to pride that they once had. Language is also a very important element to Igbo. It gives them a sense of belonging and they also use it as a

means to preserve their culture and heritage. And although language is important to Igbo, it ultimately leads to the fall of their society.

Igbo is a society that appears to be special about change. They refuse to send their children to schools where they stand a chance to be able to read and write in the English language. Despite Mr Brown's effort to show the villagers that they need to learn English because they are now being ruled by the district commissioners and other white missionaries who only communicate in English, the village still remain reluctant in educating their children.

The Igbo depend on their language to differentiate them from other culture. They also depend on language to define their social rank in their society. Okonkwo, for instance, when being compared to his father Unoka is considered as a wealthy man and not only because many yams and had no titles to his name by the time of his death. The village had named him 'Agbala' a term Igbo use to refer to 'women as well as to men who deserves no respect from society because he is not wealthy'.

Based on the definition of 'Agbala' it is evident that a man needs to gain the respect to Igbo society by fulfilling either one of the three requirement that are used to define the social status of a man. That is by either having more than one wife, producing many yams or by defeating the strongest man in the village in a wrestling match, which also determines the number of women he marries because families usually marry off their daughters to strong wealthy men.

Igbo is a compassionate yet violent society. This is seen through the characters of Okonkwo who is generally a representatives of the tribe. However, Okonkwo's actions show that Igbo only become violent when certain factors force them to be for example, Okonkwo shoots one of the messengers who are sent by the missionaries to break up their meeting.

He does this because he is tired of the white missionaries and the power of authority they have claimed over their village. Although it is not the best decision to be taken by him, it is understandable why he does it instead they let the other messengers escape and sit back and watch the missionaries take total control of their territory.

It could be argued that this is the case because their hostility, whether on a smaller scale or larger scale, has always been restricted within the boundaries of their land. Based on

this statement in justifies why Igbo do not light back against white missionaries. Who take refuge in their land and threaten to change all aspects of their culture. It is rather disappointing that Igbo not only welcome the white missionaries to their land but they also easily allocate them a piece of it.

Achebe is successful in making readers aware that although the effect of European colonialism challenges the culture of Igbo, the benefits of it can also be seen. Igbo society stands its benefit from the school and from other smaller things such as bicycles that the White Men come with. Forcing Igbo people to abandon their own way of life to follow theirs seems to be the only factor that makes the white missionaries bad people in history.

The wrong approach taken by the westerners is seen in their attitude towards the Igbo of total submission and gratitude from the. Their arrival in Umuofia came unexpected and it did not help that upon their arrival they thought that because they were more civilized and educated they should be the ones to rule in Umuofia and not Igbo. By so doing they immediately unintentionally belittled the status and importance of Igbo in their own land. This is a great disrespect to Igbo and their ancestors, which is what angered and offender the Igbos the most. It would have been pleasant if the missionaries held the Igbo people at the same high standard they thought they were at.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of *Things Fall Apart* is to explore the imperfections of Igbo culture as well as its strengths. Although Achebe presents these imperfections to readers that also contribute to the deconstruction of their culture, the main reason for the fall of the Igbo was caused by their inability and reluctance to learn English because they believed that they will never have to apply its usage in their everybody lives. The white man saw Igbo as a burden that they had to take care of by informing and educating them of things they did not know.

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