

A Short History of
Chinua Achebe's
Things Fall Apart

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Introduction

The publication of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was heralded as the inaugural moment of modern African fiction, and the book remains the most widely read African novel of all time. It has been translated into more than sixty languages, has sold over twelve million copies, and is a required text at the primary, secondary, and tertiary educational levels the world over. While *Things Fall Apart* is neither the first African novel to be published in the West nor necessarily the most critically valued, its enduring, larger-than-life iconicity has surpassed even that of its author. It is in this spirit that it is included in the Ohio Short Histories of Africa series.

Set in the early years of the twentieth century, *Things Fall Apart* revolves around Okonkwo, a brave Igbo warrior whose drive and determination lead him to the highest echelon of his clan in the village of Umuofia. Passionately traditional, Okonkwo resists European colonial incursion with all his might. After his denigration at the hands of a British district officer, and determined to defend the integrity of his village, he kills a court messenger. Disappointed with what he perceives as the

passivity of his clan, he commits suicide rather than face the white man's rope.

While the novel charts the rise and fall of Okonkwo, it affords vistas into the intricate Igbo communities that constitute precolonial Umuofia and its environs, whose people's lives are governed by a supreme creator, Chukwu, and a pantheon of male and female deities. The ancestors, the living, and the dead cohabit—if not always in uninterrupted harmony—and judicial and political power is vested in a council of elders. While not the land of nightmares purported in colonial discourse, precolonial Igboland in *Things Fall Apart* is far from idyllic, and the villagers react to the colonial onslaught in a variety of ways. Amidst detentions, evangelization, court cases, and punitive expeditions, the villagers find ways to survive in the new, perilous order. According to Simon Gikandi, one of the most prominent scholars of *Things Fall Apart*, it is precisely the blurred dualities that form the thematic core of *Things Fall Apart* (tradition/modernity, Igbo/European, masculinity/femininity, orality/writing) that are the source of the novel's narrative power.¹ But the overarching theme of *Things Fall Apart* is the ideological sway of narrative. Crucially, the novel is placed within an indigenous frame of reference. The omniscient narrator is immersed in the ways—cultural and linguistic—of the clan, and retains a degree of opacity that asserts the unknowability of Igbo culture. The discursive and perspectival shift that occurs in the book's concluding paragraphs places

the spotlight on colonial discourse and its makings—the projected quasi-omniscience of colonial anthropology, and the gullibility on which the perpetuation of colonial discourse is premised, exposing the ideological burdens of language in stark, resonant ways. What Achebe does is to reflect the results of power over narrative and the power of narrative to redress.

Things Fall Apart was neither the first African novel to dwell on colonial violence, to reflect indigenous realities amidst colonial flux, nor the first to capture the cadences of indigenous languages and literary—albeit nonwritten—forms. Its uniqueness resides in the highly conceptual way in which Achebe impresses all these traits in his novel—an aesthetic and intellectual sophistication that is beholden to his rarefied cultural and educational encounters.

When the novel was published on June 17, 1958, by William Heinemann, London, Achebe was only twenty-eight years old. Its publication brought in its wake unprecedented international attention for the author, a literary explosion in Nigeria, and the creation of Heinemann's African Writers Series. Beyond the originality of its view of cultural nationalism and postcolonial contestation, the outstanding aesthetic qualities of *Things Fall Apart*—including “the epistemological and textual about-turn”² of its denouement and the deft transposition of Igbo aesthetics, orature, language, and worldview into the novelistic form—captured the attention of the Western critical establishment, leading to the novel's

enthronement in the world republic of letters. The novel's stylistic directness and its canonical status have led to its enduring curricular presence, thereby cementing the text in popular consciousness.

While the novel's literary merits and political impact have been well rehearsed in Africanist and post-colonial scholarly circles, nonspecialist readers of the novel remain largely unaware of the circumstances that produced it. Despite the critical attention, an updated, comprehensive, yet short and accessible *history* of the novel remained to be written. This is what I have attempted here.

This short history is not a work of literary criticism, even if it draws, in great part, on the tools and intellectual production of the discipline. It both explores and moves beyond the text's better-known contexts and thematic preoccupations, to engage with a range of work, much of it published in the aftermath of the novel's fiftieth anniversary, on questions relating to aesthetics, pedagogy, translation, textual materiality, and cultural adaptation and appropriation. It engages with this new and exciting scholarship to ask further questions and provide fresh insights into the story of *Things Fall Apart* as a milestone, addressing questions of canonicity, influence, and textual mediation.

The first five chapters of this work follow a chronological structure, which shifts to a thematic approach in chapters 6–10. The first part traces the literary, artistic, and political synergies behind *Things Fall Apart*.

Chapter 1 is devoted to Achebe's early fascination with "the world of stories," including religious literature, Igbo orality, and, crucially, the precolonial Igbo art form *mbari*. This is a complex aesthetic practice that merges metaphor, symbolism, and allusion in its sculptural representations of colonial rule, and one of the first vehicles through which the Igbo of the Owerri region sought to negotiate, historicize, and alleviate the shock of the colonial encounter. Focusing on the author's "mbari poetics" adds nuance to the novel's representations of colonial violence while situating the novel itself as a modern mbari house of sorts, and it provides yet another entry point for readers of *Things Fall Apart*, as well as *Arrow of God*. The second chapter discusses some aspects of Achebe's education at Government College, Umuahia, but focuses more intently on his later encounters with the literature of empire at University College, Ibadan. It shows how some of his early writing anticipated the formal aspects and thematic preoccupations of *Things Fall Apart*. Chapter 3 addresses Achebe's authorial intentions, the process of composition, and his literary networks. It also traces the manuscript's journey from submission to publication and its postpublication trajectory.

The book's second part revolves around questions of influence and impact. Chapter 4 explores the novel's initial impact in Nigeria and abroad, discussing its early reviews and showing how it precipitated a literary revolution in Nigeria. Chapter 5 maps out the dominant

critical strands that have arisen in response to the novel, while chapter 6 develops further chapter 4's discussion of Achebe's contemporaries and their works' perceived relationship with *Things Fall Apart*, raising some questions: How did first-generation Nigerian writers engage with *Things Fall Apart*, and to what extent can their colonial-themed novels be dismissed as imitations? In what ways do these textual connections differ from the avowed filiation and affiliation of more contemporary writers? How does one separate questions of influence and affiliation from those of derivativeness and imitation?

Part 3 discusses the life of *Things Fall Apart* beyond academic circles. Chapter 7 focuses on artistic interactions with the novel, including cover images and illustrations by artists Dennis Carabine and Uche Okeke in the 1960s African Writers Series editions. Chapter 8 zooms in on the novel's two film adaptations: Jürgen Pohlad's *Bullfrog in the Sun* (1971) and Adiele Onyedibia and Emma Eleanya's TV series *Things Fall Apart* (1987), as well as further examples of the novel's intertextual presence in other forms of popular culture, including drama, hip-hop, Onitsha Market writing, and advertising. Chapter 9 discusses the book's circulation and popularity, examining questions of teaching, translation, and reception and arriving at a prediction of the book's future.

This book is not only a history of the most famous African novel ever published. It is in many ways

a tribute. As we pass the sixtieth anniversary of *Things Fall Apart*, the first since the demise of its author, it is a fitting moment to celebrate anew and to ask ourselves where the rain began to beat us . . . and if it ever ceased beating.