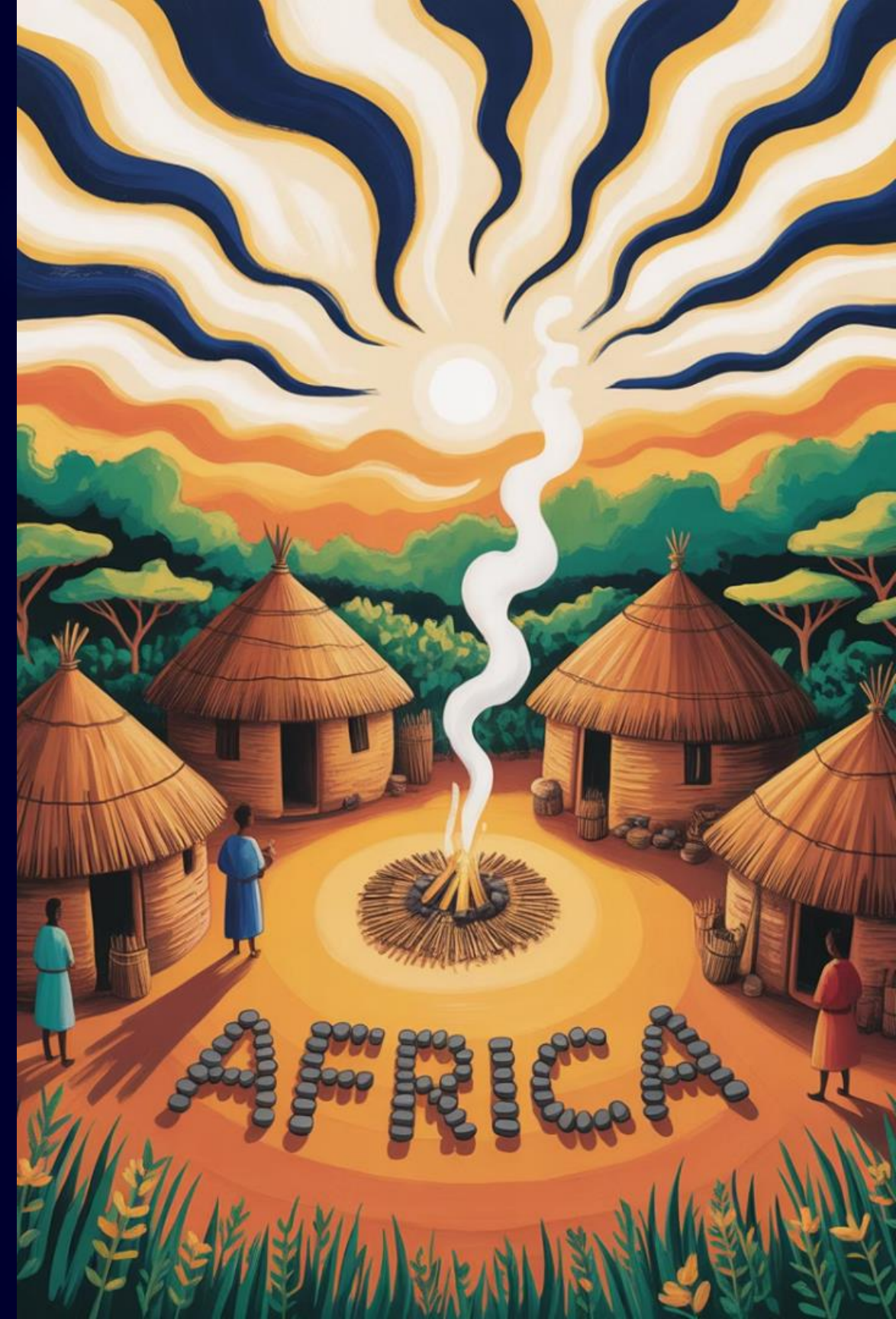


# Things Fall Apart: A Literary Analysis

Chinua Achebe's groundbreaking novel "Things Fall Apart" explores the collision between traditional Igbo society and European colonialism in late 19th century Nigeria. Through the tragic story of Okonkwo, a respected warrior whose rigid adherence to masculine ideals leads to his downfall, Achebe presents a nuanced portrait of a complex African culture on the brink of irreversible change.

This presentation examines the novel's key elements, from its historical context and characters to its exploration of themes like tradition, masculinity, and the devastating impact of colonialism on indigenous cultures.



# About the Author: Chinua Achebe



## Early Life & Education

Born in Igbo town of Ogidi in southeastern Nigeria, Achebe was raised by Protestant parents but also exposed to traditional Igbo culture and storytelling.



## Literary Career

Began writing stories as a university student, published "Things Fall Apart" in 1958 to worldwide acclaim. Later published numerous short stories, children's books, and essay collections.



## Professional Life

Worked as an English teacher in Oba and for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service in Lagos. Split time between Nigeria and the United States until 1990, when a car accident left him partially disabled.



## Legacy

Held faculty position at Brown University from 2009 until his death in 2013. Known for his critique of Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and brief involvement in Nigerian politics.

# Historical Context

Set in 1890 during the early days of colonialism in Nigeria, "Things Fall Apart" depicts Igbo society in transition, from its first contact with British colonialists to the growing dominance of British rule over the indigenous people.

Literary works about this period often painted stereotypical portraits of native Africans as primitives. Even works critical of European colonizers, such as Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," depicted Africans as savages. Achebe's novel responds to these colonialist works as a postcolonial novel that strives to revise previous stereotypes by portraying both cultures with a neutral eye, focusing on the complexity of Igbo traditions.

While working on "Things Fall Apart," Achebe had few models of African fiction written in English, though he appreciated the work of fellow Nigerian writers Amos Tutuola and Cyprian Ekwensi. He later attended a conference with contemporary African writers including Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor, Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, and US poet Langston Hughes.

## Literary Period

Post-colonialism

## Setting

Pre-colonial Nigeria, 1890s

## Publication

Written in 1957, published in 1958

# Plot Summary

## Rise of Okonkwo

1

As a young man, Okonkwo becomes one of the greatest wrestlers in the clan. Determined not to be weak like his father Unoka, he builds wealth and status with three wives and many yams. He treats his family harshly, showing only anger as emotion.

## Exile

3

During Ezeudu's funeral, Okonkwo's gun explodes, killing Ezeudu's son. Having killed a clansman, Okonkwo and his family are exiled to his motherland, Mbanta, for seven years. Meanwhile, white missionaries begin appearing in neighboring clans.

4

## Ikemefuna's Arrival and Death

A boy named Ikemefuna comes to live with Okonkwo's family as part of a peace settlement. After three years, the clan decides Ikemefuna must be killed. Despite being warned not to participate, Okonkwo delivers the killing blow, fearing appearing weak.

## Return and Downfall

Upon returning to a changed Umuofia, Okonkwo finds the white men have established a church and government. After the clan burns down the church in retaliation for a convert's sacrilege, Okonkwo kills a court messenger and then hangs himself when he realizes his clan will not fight the white men.

# Major Characters

## Okonkwo

The novel's protagonist, a respected clan leader who fears becoming weak like his father. Hardworking and aggressive, his fame and wealth grow, but his impatience and brashness lead to his downfall when he can't adjust to the changes in the clan.

## Nwoye

Okonkwo's eldest son who resembles his grandfather Unoka in his gentleness. The tension between father and son leads to a split when Nwoye joins the Christians, rejecting his father's violent ways.

## Ikemefuna

A boy sacrificed to Umuofia to prevent war. He lives with Okonkwo's family for three years, becoming like a son to Okonkwo and a brother to Nwoye before being killed by Okonkwo himself.

## Ezinma

Okonkwo's favorite child, his daughter with his second wife Ekwefi. She understands her father well, and he wishes she had been born a son. She shares a close relationship with her mother.

# Minor Characters



Unoka

Okonkwo's father, a talented musician but lazy and irresponsible, accumulating many debts. His shameful death haunts Okonkwo, who vows to hate everything his father loved.



Obierika

Okonkwo's close friend who questions clan traditions. He helps Okonkwo by selling his yams and visiting him in exile.



Mr. Brown

The first white missionary who institutes respect and compromise between church and clan. He builds a school and hospital, avoiding violence and harsh methods.



District Commissioner

Represents colonial authority. Plans to write a book called "The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger," revealing his superior attitude toward the Igbo people.

Other significant characters include Ekwefi (Okonkwo's second wife), Reverend James Smith (who replaces Mr. Brown with stricter methods), Chielo (a widow who serves as priestess), and Uchendu (Okonkwo's maternal uncle who shelters him during exile).

# Major Themes



## Tradition vs. Change

The novel explores how Umuofia traditions of marriage, burial, and harvest cannot survive the major changes brought by colonialism. Okonkwo represents tradition while his son Nwoye embodies change.



## Masculinity

Okonkwo's dedication to masculine ideals (strength, aggression, emotional restraint) ultimately leads to his downfall as he becomes brittle and unable to adapt to changes in his clan.



## Language

Language is vital to Umuofia society through oratory, storytelling, and proverbs. The white men's written language begins to represent power as more clan members learn English.



## Religion

Religion represents order in both societies but manifests differently. Western religion breaks order in Umuofia by empowering outcasts and clan members without title.

# Symbols and Contemporary Relevance



## Fire

Symbolizes Okonkwo's aggressive, powerful nature. His realization that "living fire begets cold, impotent ash" foreshadows how his aggression leads to his own destruction.



## Yams

Represents masculinity and wealth in Umuofia society. Only men plant yams, and a man's ability to support his family with his harvest signifies his status.



## The Commissioner's Book

Symbolizes how colonial powers control the narrative about colonized peoples, reducing complex cultures to simplistic stereotypes.

Achebe's novel remains profoundly relevant today as it addresses themes of cultural identity, the impact of colonialism, and the complexity of traditional societies. It challenges Western narratives about Africa and gives voice to those whose stories were previously told only through a colonial lens.

The novel's exploration of how societies respond to change and outside influence resonates in our globalized world, where cultures continue to negotiate between tradition and modernity. By humanizing both sides of the colonial encounter while acknowledging its fundamental injustice, Achebe created a work that continues to inspire discussions about cultural understanding, respect, and the lasting effects of imperialism.