

## **Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart***

### **Overview**

*Things Fall Apart* (1958) portrays Igbo society prior to and during European colonization. The novel follows Okonkwo and his family but also includes a broader picture of the Igbo society. As Okonkwo's life and society unravels, he reaches a breaking point and must decide whether to accept the new ways of the Europeans or confront the white settlers. This can be a tough story to read--there are some uncomfortable moments and Okonkwo is not an entirely likeable character—but it's also deeply moving and, in the end, very rewarding as well.

### **Author**

Chinua Achebe (1930- ). Perhaps the most widely-read black African writer, best known for his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Born in Ogidi, West Nigeria, to Isaiah Okafo and Janet N. Iloegbunam Achebe. His father, an Anglican churchman and teacher, raised him as Christian and sent him to Church Mission Society School as a child. Originally born Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, he dropped the Christian name "Albert" and shortened his second name to Chinua. After graduating from University College at Ibadan (University of Ibadan) in Nigeria, he worked in broadcasting before becoming a writer. In 1961 he married Christiana Chinwe Okoli; they have four children. Of particular interest to critics and literary historians is his decision to write in English; by making that choice, many say, he helped create modern African literature. Besides novels, he has written children's stories, essays, and poetry. In 2007 he won the Man Booker International Prize for fiction. He currently teaches at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.

### **Discussion questions**

- What are Okonkwo's values and fears? What is he most afraid of?
- Does Ikemefuna's murder change Okonkwo? Does it change our view of him?
- Is Okonkwo a unique individual or a representative of his society? Is he ever at odds with his society's views—and if so, what is the nature of that conflict?
- How does Okonkwo's favorite daughter, Ezinma, figure into the story? Are his feelings for her consistent with the larger values of his society?
- Why is Okonkwo able to go through with his last action of the novel? Is there anything else he could have done? How, in any case, are we supposed to feel about his decision?
- What falls apart during the course of the novel? What is implied about European colonization and civilization?

## Lecture

This lecture by Professor Lifongo Vetinde was given in the winter of 2000. It covers lots of topics and offers many opportunities for discussion. Issues include Western discourse and African response, the Negritude movement of the 1950s and '60s, the novel's title and its larger purpose. Visit the website below to listen to the lecture.

[http://www.lawrence.edu/dept/freshman\\_studies/lectures/0001/achebe.shtml](http://www.lawrence.edu/dept/freshman_studies/lectures/0001/achebe.shtml)

## Links

While there are many websites about *Things Fall Apart*, and many more about Achebe, it may also be interesting to look into the country of Nigeria and its history of colonization. Here are some websites, for starters.

- CIA World Factbook (about Nigeria):  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html>
- Encyclopaedia Britannica (about colonization in Nigeria):  
<http://www.britannica.com/ebi/article-9276094/Nigeria>
- Bartleby.com (about the Igbo):  
<http://www.bartleby.com/65/ig/Igbo.html>