

Say you're one of  
them



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In many respects, the world's attention has shied away from modern Africa in recent years, most likely due to the unsteady domestic situations in other parts of the world. Recently, however, the collection of stories written by Uwem Akpan, *Say You're One of Them*, has brought back to the forefront all of the pain and challenge of life in Africa at the present time. The humanity that comes through the words not only tugs at the heartstrings of the reader, but also makes strong statements about cultural conflict, class struggles and other social phenomena.

This research will not only discuss Akpan's work, but also these intertwined issues within the work. Ultimately, the work will be better appreciated and understood, but also, modern issues will be brought to light. Discussion of the Various Issues of Cultural Conflict within the Story When the research was introduced, the point was made that Akpan's work was not only deeply emotional, but also makes strong cultural statements. Taking that assertion a step further is possible when using specific examples from the work to identify and discuss the various aspects of cultural conflict to be found in the story.

The first of the areas of cultural conflict which emerges in the work is the vast divide between the economic classes within modern Africa. An early story in the work tells of a young boy whose sister turns to street prostitution in order for him to be able to afford to attend school- a blatant attempt to escape the lower class and ascend in African society. So intense is this desire to advance that extreme measures are taken by poor Africans to make ends meet: " When Baby was born, we pawned three quarters of his clothes to defray debts" (Akpan, 2008, p. 13).

Therefore, fellow Africans are in fact culturally divided along economic lines, despite hailing from the same homeland. Language is also a dividing factor in modern day Africa, or more specifically, the way that someone's voice sounds not only could set them apart from others in a cultural context, but in fact could lead to bodily harm for those of one culture who encounter opposition from another, as seen in this excerpt from the work: " He was an easy target for the sporadic violence that seized the land...a simple thing like his accent could give him away" (Akpan, 2008, p. 93). This is an interesting element of cultural conflict in a highly diverse continent- it is a unique type of situation whereby someone who merely speaks in a different way than others could in fact set them apart and lead to fractured subcultures, but that is exactly what Akpan is portraying. Additionally, there is a subculture of violence that is prevalent in the Africa of today; to be more specific, much of Africa is ruled at the present by wealthy warlords, who essentially build their own armies and make their own rules for their own advancement.

Basically, these individuals are using force to alienate and oppress their own fellow Africans, keeping the weak in a state of poverty and preventing them from possible improvements that would allow them to surpass their oppressors: " Our northern generals are responsible for the extreme poverty in the land" (Akpan, 2008, p. 314). Therefore, we see the establishment of a new culture of the powerful over that of the weak. This culture is likewise somewhat restrictive, as the penalty for trying to escape it would be brutality at best, and death at worst.

Changes in the Culture in the Story In Say You're One of Them, there are sweeping changes to African culture that can be seen when looking more

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closely at the points that are made in work; the culture is essentially shifting from one of proud traditions and an embracing of the diversity of the various nations of the continent to a more divided one, where differences in economic status, language and ability to fight back against those who have the power to destroy one another has taken precedence (Mwaria, et al, 2004).

An important point needs to be made here- although what is happening in Africa according to Akpan is certainly distressing, it is not unique to Africa, nor is it limited to lands where opportunity is less than widely available. This can be pointed out with a look into other cultures where division is complicating matters at present. A Study of Other Cultures Like Africa, the United States is a melting pot of different cultures and also like Africa, has encountered its share of culture clash in recent years.

This conflict has taken place in several diverse cultures and has divided people in several different ways. First, along lines of ethnicity, the US has seen a renewed level of awareness of the fundamental differences in human beings as a result of the horrific terrorist acts of September 11, 2001 on American soil. Because of this pivotal event, those wishing to immigrate to the US from other nations, whether legally or illegally, have met with opposition ranging from disdain to outrage and acts of unwarranted violence (Moser, 2000).

It would seem that like Africa, the diversity of culture that made America such a unique place has been watered down in a flurry of prejudice, fear and false impressions about one ethnic group or another. Instead of introducing

new cultures into the American landscape and then allowing them to assimilate into the prevailing American culture, people are being excluded from the opportunity to do so from the beginning, not only depriving them of opportunity, but also stifling the advancement of American society from within. Politically, Americans have also formed subcultures that of late have been in a great deal of conflict.

Recent years have seen differences in political mindset become key issues that instead of bringing these individuals together for the sake of healthy debate, have in many cases divided individuals to the detriment of the political process (Shogan, 2002). From time to time, this difference has also turned volatile in more than one instance as wars of words sometimes turn into acts of violence. Lastly, class envy is also alive and well in America, creating cultural conflicts, especially given the current dire economic climate in the world.

Tied closely to the political issues of the nation, economically diverse people are commonly divided by a lack of understanding of each other's culture- a culture defined by money and privilege or the absence thereof. Overall Analysis of the Reading Akpan's book opened the eyes of the researcher in many ways, not the least of which was in terms of gaining an understanding that cultural differences can either create a wonderful blend of different traditions and ideas or can divide people and lead them to destroy others.

This realization evoked in the researcher the feeling that diversity must be embraced, lest its power consume and destroy one culture at the hands of another. Conclusion The research has made important points about culture,

diversity, and the perpetual change of the human condition. In conclusion, perhaps the best point to take away from the research is the fact that without a tolerance at least and embracing at best of diversity, no one can truly be free.