

The culmination of tragedy: tradition and change in things fall apart

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Tradition and change are as much at war as the people are in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. The events that define this war are centered on and around the main character, Okonkwo, who finds himself unable to adapt to the changes taking place in his society. His refusal to change, contrasted with his society's willingness to change, is both a personal and broader tragedy. The theme of tradition versus change in *Things Fall Apart* is used to highlight the tragedy of both Okonkwo's isolation and his society's dissipation.

Tradition is integral to the society in which *Things Fall Apart* is set. Okonkwo lives with his family in the Umuofia clan, one of nine collective villages that uphold the same set of beliefs and traditions. Their lives revolve around their belief in ancestral spirits, called *egwugwu*, and multiple gods that demand sacrifices and strict rituals in exchange for their guidance and prosperity. Many customs define everyday life, such as the kola nut and palm-wine which are presented when receiving company, and the language spoken that conveys thoughtfulness and respect. An interaction involving Okonkwo's father, Unoka, and a man whom he owed money to depicts the importance of language to their society: "Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe 4). They do not value simple language, but rhetorical and formal language that, while it may be inefficient, is a custom that shows sophistication and respect. The metaphor of words for food is especially important because it implies that language and communication are as necessary to life as food. Furthermore, it implies that these customs and everyday aspects of their culture are necessary to their life in that they

establish communal morality through which individuals can connect and grow as a society.

In addition to these habitual customs are commandments that determine one's place in society and coordinate a set of checks and balances. Achebe illustrates the importance of this system through Okonkwo's beating of his wife, Ojiugo, during peace week. The week of peace is a sacred part of Igbo culture in which the people must live without violence of any sort for a week in order to receive a blessing for their crops from Aní, one of their gods. The priest of the earth goddess, Ezeani, tells him that "the evil you have done can ruin the whole clan" (Achebe 30) and he must repent and pay a fine for his sins. One of the more adverse functions of the Igbo customs is the separation of the *osu* from the rest of society. An *osu* is "a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart—a taboo forever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the free-born. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village...wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste—long, tangled and dirty hair" (156). The *osu* are at the bottom of the social order, while the council of elders are at the top and sit in judgment of society. Every aspect of life is defined by tradition, from social classes to spoken language. The Igbo people have been living by these customs for generations and they provide structure and regulation for each individual. As is often the case, though, the severe nature of such beliefs creates gaps between the individual and the group.

These gaps are what allow the colonizers to swarm in and convert so many of the Igbo people to the new religion. When Christianity comes, it thrives

specifically because it capitalizes on the weaknesses of society. The osu rush to the new religion because it welcomes them as equals, as well as many other individuals deprived by tradition. In Joseph McLaren's essay "Things Fall Apart: Cultural and Historical Context," he explains that "Achebe uses the Umuofians' abandonment of the twins, which was a general practice among the real-life Igbo, and their sacrifice of Ikemefuna, a demonstration of reciprocal justice perhaps, to show Igbo culture's vulnerability or susceptibility to Christian conversion." (8). While the elders and members with good standing in the civilization were not tempted by Christian freedoms, the individuals that were destitute and oppressed by it were immediately drawn to such freedom. The outcasts had lost all respect in their village, either by their own doing or by bad luck, and they saw the new religion as an escape from their shame and humiliation.

Eventually, even Okonkwo's own son, Nwoye, joins the Christians. Nwoye was never a sufficient son by Okonkwo standards; he acted too much like a woman, which reminded Okonkwo of his lazy father, and because of this Okonkwo was especially tough on Nwoye. Okonkwo "had no patience with unsuccessful men" (Achebe 2) and it is clear that Okonkwo has scared Nwoye into submission because Nwoye's attraction to Christianity initially comes from the songs that depict "brothers who lived in darkness and in fear, ignorant of the love of God" (153). Just like the ostracized members of the clan, Okonkwo's own son abandons his family and faith to convert to Christianity in order to gain his own freedom. After Nwoye's betrayal of the clan, Okonkwo exclaims that "you all have seen the great abomination of

your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye" (172). Okonkwo is so disappointed in his son that he denies Nwoye as a son and degrades him to the role of a woman.

Just as Okonkwo loses his son to the new religion, Igbu people, as well as their traditions, are being lost to it in the same way. Uchendu, Okonkwo's uncle who shelters him when he moves to Mbanta, claims that " It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you." (116-7).

Uchendu's aphorism is representative of the Igbu civilization losing members to the colonizers. The Igbu are the fatherland and the colonizers are the motherland, while the child is representative of the individuals in society that seek the freedom and security of the new religion. Not only is this revelation reflective of the loss of Igbu tradition, but also the reason for it. The Igbu, especially Okonkwo, refuse to doubt any of their beliefs to the extent that they believed the converts to be " the excrement of the clan, and the new faith was a mad dog that had come to eat it up" (124). Unfortunately, this refusal to change only strengthens the temptation of the freedom the colonizers offer and hastens the tragic loss of Igbu culture.

The loss of Igbu culture is seen predominantly through Okonkwo's point of view, which serves to highlight its tragic aspects. Okonkwo's father was not an upstanding member of his clan, nor was he very successful, which led

Okonkwo to do everything in his power to become an honorable and hardworking man. Despite his best efforts, though, even Okonkwo does not live up to all of the standards set for him. He beats his wife during a time of peace and takes part in the killing of Ikemefuma despite Ogbuefi's warning. In Matthew Bolton's essay "'You Must Not Stand in One Place': Reading Things Fall Apart in Multiple Contexts," he asserts that "like Oedipus and other tragic heroes of the Athenian playwrights, Okonkwo is a flawed man. Yet he is destroyed not so much by these flaws as by broad and impersonal forces of history. He has the misfortune to subscribe wholeheartedly to Igbo culture at a time when this culture was being dismantled and abandoned" (4). Okonkwo's character is tragic on both a personal level and a broader, thematic level. His personal tragedies are mostly due to his overly ambitious compulsion to become a leader of his clan, which often backfires and leads him into trouble. One such minor tragedy is the result of Okonkwo's participation in Ikemefuma's death. Ogbuefi warned Okonkwo not to serve any blows to Ikemefuma, but he struck him anyway in order to prove his manliness. Later, at Ogbuefi's funeral, Okonkwo's gun accidentally goes off and kills Ogbuefi's son, which can be seen as Okonkwo's punishment for striking Ikemefuma. This accident is a minor tragedy in itself because not only was Ogbuefi's innocent son killed, but also Okonkwo must spend 7 years in banishment. This punishment is especially cruel for Okonkwo because "his life had been ruled by a great passion - to become one of the lords of the clan" (Achebe 114) and his punishment removes him from his clan.

Okonkwo's character also presents the broad tragedy that the novel encapsulates: the loss of Igbo culture to Christian colonization. While Okonkwo was laboring away in attempt to gain authority and respect in his clan, the lowest of his clan were gradually converting. He is blinded by his devotion and cannot see that the members of his clan no longer feel the same dedication to their beliefs. It is not until he is the sole rebel against the colonizers that he realizes that his tribe is lost, and his consequential suicide is his final tragic act. In the Igbo belief, "it is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it" (Achebe 178). Okonkwo realizes that his clan is converting, but he will not join them, so he commits suicide. His suicide is tragic not just because it goes against Igbo beliefs, but because it embodies the complete loss of these beliefs. Okonkwo is devoted to tradition and customs and would never willingly go against them, which suggests that his suicide represents his own loss of faith as well as the end of his culture. Bolton insists that "in his prime, Okonkwo embodied the ideals of Ibo culture, and his death serves not to restore the values of his culture but to hasten their own demise" (4). Okonkwo's character illustrates personal tragedy in his own misfortunes and eventual loss of beliefs and also finalizes the extensive tragedy of the conversion of his civilization to Christianity.

The conflict between tradition and change is a common theme in societies as they grow and encounter the rest of the world. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* illustrates this by the introduction of Christian colonizers to the Igbo

society and the eventual decimation of Igbo culture. The traditional beliefs and customs that provide order for the Igbo people are contrasted by the Christian ideal of freedom. The conflict between the two cultures culminates a tragedy on a personal and cultural level, portrayed through Okonkwo's loss of faith and the destruction of the Igbo people.

Works Cited

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