

Chinua achebe's
things fall apart: the
use of food in the
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In his novel *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe draws a lively portrait of a Nigerian people, the Igbo, at the end of the nineteenth century, when the British colonization began in Africa. Chinua Achebe's main achievement in the novel is that of accurately rendering a complex picture of the African cultural tradition and identity from the inside the tradition itself, that is, by telling a story of the Igbo people which speaks for itself and which sees life from the perspective of the Nigerian people and not from the outside.

The most important message of the book is clearly the gradual demise of the Igbo culture, of its traditions, customs and religion under the powerful wave of white European civilization. This message is already enclosed in the title of the novel: Achebe describes in his book the "falling apart" of the African culture.

The African world as we glimpse it in Achebe's book, is actually rich in tradition and sophisticated, although, indeed, very different from the European because it is dominated by the metaphorical and poetical modes of thinking rather than by the reductionist modes belonging to the whites.

The use of food as a literary motif is particularly suggestive for the construction of the main theme in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. As it shall be seen, food has a special, complex meaning for the Nigerian people. For the Igbo community, food represents much more than a necessity: as with all the other common everyday activities, the Igbo culture attaches particular symbolism to food.

Thus, there are festivals dedicated to food, such as the Yam festival, and common rituals that involve food and drink, such as the "breaking of the

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kola nut". More than fulfilling an elementary need, food represents man's connection with the fertile earth and with nature in general.

It is part of the integrative view of the universe that the Igbo people entertain. For the Igbo, the rituals and festivals that involve food also provide a connection with the world of the dead. The respect and celebration of the dead emphasizes the people's belief in continuity from the past to the present and from death to life:

"It was an occasion for giving thanks to Aní, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility. Aní played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth." (Achebe 72)

Therefore, for the Igbo, food represents a connection with the earth and implicitly both with life symbolized by the fertility of nature, and with death, because of the dead bodies that are buried in the earth. The same symbolisms appear in one of the central rituals of Igbo culture. The breaking of the kola nut is the ritual used before the all traditional public events, such as weddings, meetings or political gatherings. Again, there is particular emphasis of food as a means of communion among the spirits of the living and those of the dead:

"The kola nut is broken and shared among the visible men (human beings) and the invisible men (spirit beings), after which the wine is served. The kola is eaten and the wine drunk as a sign of the spiritual communion and unity that is intended to bring life and prosperity to the people. The ritual must

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also precede all traditional Igbo public events, including weddings, naming ceremonies, meetings, and political gatherings.”(Ogbaa, 107)

Moreover, eating food in can also have moral implications for the community. Throughout the novel, there are certain indications that associate food practices with ethical principles. For example, eating eggs is considered wrong, especially for children, as it is said to prompt stealing: “ Ekwefi even gave her such delicacies as eggs, which children were rarely allowed to eat because such food tempted them to steal” (Achebe 111). Moreover, the Igbo culture is replete with proverbs and myths that emphasize food.

For instance, in the myth of the tortoise, which is meant to explain why the tortoise shell is not smooth, the act of eating is associated with greed and injustice. The tortoise king falls from the sky after a heavy meal and breaks its shell to pieces: “ But before they left each took back the feather he had lent to Tortoise. And there he stood in his hard shell full of food and wine but without any wings to fly home” (Achebe 124).

The oral culture of the Igbo is certainly the most important part of their tradition, and their praise of proverbs and the telling of folk stories implies the respect for their own ancestry: “ Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten”(Achebe 10).

The proverbs are linked to the palm oil that was the most common ingredient for the Igbo foods, to show that tradition was alive in the

community all the time, and although they are warriors who believe in <https://assignbuster.com/chinua-achebes-things-fall-apart-the-use-of-food-in-the-development-of-the-novels-theme/>

prowess as much as Okonkwo does, they equally praise peacefulness and are inclined to avoid conflicts as much as possible.

This is evident in the many episodes in which the men of the village gather to resolve a certain issue, but never address it directly, only after a great conversational detour, filled with proverbs and pieces of traditional wisdom: "As the men drank, they talked about everything except the thing for which they had gathered" (Achebe 69). Food therefore plays an essential part in the Igbo culture, thus serving the main theme of the novel: the contrast between the African and the European worlds.

Thus, the Igbo use their traditions and beliefs on every occasion, and avoid all abrupt discussions of a certain problem, that has to be first of all enveloped in the traditional context of beliefs. Food is subjected to the same regulation, acquiring a symbolic value in the Igbo culture.

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