

# Things fall apart: a critical analysis essay

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Things Fall Apart (1958) is a fictional novel by Chinua Achebe that examines the life the Igbo tribe living in a rural village called Umuofia in Nigeria during the early 19th century. The central values of the novel revolve around status, virtues, power, and traditions that often determine the futures and present of the characters in the Achebe story. The novel shows the life of the protagonist Okonkwo and his family, village, and Igbo culture and the affects of colonisation of Umuofia on him and the people of his village by Christian missionaries. In this essay, I plan to look at colonialism in the novel before and after and the impact on Okonkwo and the village Umuofia and examine how colonization transformed their tribe's culture, tradition, and religion.

As well, I plan to compare and contrast Achebe's novel it to Allen Issacman's " Resistance and Collaboration in Southern and Central Africa 1850-1920" reading which shows the scramble for Africa to further illustrate the affects of colonialism in Africa from two different perspectives to better understand conflict in Africa. Therefore, my argument for this essay is when two cultures intertwine together the imposing culture that is more powerful will alter or destroy aspects of the weaker culture's way of life with negative consequences. In Things Fall Apart (1958) the main protagonist of the story is Okonkwo who is a wealthy farmer, with three wives and many children. Despite his highly feared and respected exterior, Okonkwo is man obsessed with an overwhelming fear of failure and weakness caused by his own father's shameful life and suicide death. This motivates him to become the most powerful and respected man in his village by his skills as a strong warrior and rich farmer, and makes him a prominent member of his

community. As the people of Umuofia honour his extraordinary achievements and reward him with many distinguished titles.

To Okonkwo, his beliefs often dominate his household and his decisions and actions and his importance of keeping up an image in order to please others and himself, that alienated him from his family and children. Another important factor is the Igbo's culture and tradition. In the novel, the clan practices tribal traditions which involve the worship of gods, sacrifice, communal living, and magic. In the Igbo culture, leadership is based on a man's values and his contribution to the good of the tribe like Okonkwo demonstrates in the novel. In the novel Okonkwo stands out as a great leader of the tribe for his many achievements. However, after part two in the novel when Okonkwo accidentally killed his friend Ezeudenu son he is banished from his village Umuofia for seven years, he and his family move to Okonkwo's mother's tribe Mbanta. After settling in Mbanata, is when the missionaries known as the "white men" began to arrive in Nigeria at the height of colonialism attempts to convert most of the villages to Christianity.

With their religion, the missionaries brought their weapons, government, and their culture and traditions that ultimately replaced Igbo's culture that was seen as "inferior" which often occurs in colonialism. This made Okonkwo to resent the missionaries for expanding their beliefs and religion onto their villages and cultures. This example shows the negative impacts of colonialism on the Okonkwo, from his perspective the "white men" being to tear the things apart that held him and his tribe's belief by imposing their culture upon them. The result has a direct effect on Okonkwo personal life, when his son Nwoye becomes a convert and runs away to become a

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member of the church and when Okonkwo returns to Umuofia and to his shock sees his village transformed and governed by the white men through and the culture and customs of the land have been abandoned and the numbers of converts were increasing daily.

Missionaries were the superior to the Igbo people dominating their village through their religion and governance. Enraged, Okonkwo tries to provoke his tribe's people to resist the missionaries, but he fails as no one had the nerve to follow him. Ashamed, Okonkwo ends up in the novel committing suicide, thus dying a shameful and dishonourable death like his father. The strengths of Achebe's novel and Issacman's reading are how they illustrated how colonialism tears culture and tradition apart.

In Achebe novel, it is has many historical contexts that occurred British colonialism that brought over their government and religion and their indirect ruling at the beginning of the 19th century in Africa. When the Christian missionaries came over and basically said that the traditions were wrong, Okonkwo would not stand for it. However, one of the weakness of the novel is Okonkwo overbearing expectations of his family and himself and the extremes he took to restoring his village to the way it was before which is too much as well the conflict of colonialism did not come until halfway through the book. However the strength of the novel is how Achebe illustrated the Igbo culture before the arrival of colonialist and missionaries. This helped us actually understand why Okonkwo and Africans felt at that time in colonialism in West Africa. From Achebe perspective, he shows the characters in the novel and in history how Africans view Europeans as odd and possibly threatening invaders. We experience colonialism, therefore, <https://assignbuster.com/things-fall-apart-a-critical-analysis-essay/>

from the perspective of a colonized people. As Okonkwo friend, Obierika metaphorically explains how colonialism tore apart the Igbo culture and tradition “ The white man is very clever.

.. now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (pg 176) .

This passage clearly ties the destruction of the Igbo people’s way of life by the British missionaries during this time period and how they tore apart their very beliefs that bound the tribe and village together by the imposing their culture upon them. This quote also has a direct link to Issacman’s article which discusses the affects of colonialism in southern and central Africa, and how colonialism has never been easily accepted in African societies and acknowledged that some African rulers were manipulated by the Europeans imperialist and how more often they pursued clear purposes of maintenance domination and control of power within their colony and the elimination of rebels or threat of revolt. Through Issacman’s reading its major strength was how he described Southern and central Africa from a more strategic and expansionist approach to help understanding colonialism and conflict during the scramble for Africa period.

He also touches more upon the discrimination faced by Africans and how were first perceived by Europeans as “ one dimensional” and inferiority complex will deemed them too substandard to have control over their land and govern their citizens. Europeans began to become more interested in Africa when they realized the abundance in resources available such as

diamonds, minerals, fruits, and oil has a source of revenue which makes colonisation desirable for European to impose. Through this fact Issacman established helps us understand Achebe novel from an economic standpoint as shown in chapter 21, after the missionaries arrive they began to export palm oil and palm nut kernels as shown in and the people of the village begin to see a source revenue come into the village. Despite the revenue made in the novel, Issacman explains in reality that the actions by expansionist's had weakened many states polities in Africa and decreased any chance of resistance by so states would have no choice but accept the Colonist in order to have some sort of protection. From Issacman's reading, his explanation on expansionist strategies helps the readers understand how religion plays in Things Fall Apart as Achebe depicted the missionaries somewhat like expansionist in their attempt to lure the tribes people through Christianity. Through religion, Achebe shows the conflict encounter when other a powerful cultures attempts to impose their beliefs on weaker cultures. In the novel, the missionaries would accept any person into their religion including the people of the village who were not accepted in within the tribe that were poor, female, men with no statues, etc.

Conflict begins were the missionaries attempt to educated the people of the village by explaining monotheism in Christianity which conflicts with the Igbo's religious beliefs in different spirits and Gods. Thus, religion plays a big part in the downfall because religion was everything to the Igbo people; it was their way of life. Thus, this is why Okonkwo felt betrayed by when the people Umuofia and his son Nwoye turn to Christianity and abandoning their brothers and joining the Church and missionaries, they were turning on

themselves and the very values and beliefs that they were taught. Thus as Issacman's work explains that in history, many people have ignored the impact of expansionist on African states and the state's ability to resist. When the missionaries start to settle in Umuofia there is not much resistance shown in the novel as necessary to defend their land and culture, thus the missionaries were easily able to dominate over the Igbo people.

What Achebe novel fails to elaborate is what Issacman reading achieves and explanation is that often indigenous populations are not often accepting of colonialism or "new force" as he puts it, as the novel demonstrated and in those cases usually if the indigenous population refuse to integrate with the new force often force would be used. A major weakness I find in Achebe work that he was not able to show any resistance besides Okonkwo own personal resistance against the missionaries in order to protect their land and culture. From a historical context, Nigeria has long history of wars and political instability I think that the novel would have benefited from showing more resistance than domination in the novel.

I would have like to see as well. What Achebe novel fails to elaborate is what Issacman reading achieves and explanation is that often indigenous populations are not often accepting of colonialism or "new force" as he puts it, as the novel demonstrated and in those cases usually if the indigenous population refuse to integrate with the new force often force would be used. I think that the novel would surely of benefited from further examining the effect of the missionaries on everyone in the village rather than focusing on Okonkwo resentment and indifference towards the missionaries which I found Achebe to portray in often a positive light such as accepting the lower status

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people in the village. As told in reading many of the British colonies used a system of indirect ruling where somewhat of the traditional governmental is incorporated into a new government. The major differences I find in Achebe novel and Issacman's reading is that Achebe is a fictional novel that gives a reader a inside look at the African tribes, culture and beliefs before and after colonisation, while Issacman reading which non fictional, show the effects of colonisation from a historical, economic, and social perspective. Out of the two, I believe that Issacman's reading shows a truer account of conflict in Africa because it looked at many factors to why the Europeans expanded their empire and territory in Africa and in abundance in natural resources and human resources (i. e. slaves and labourers) and capitalism made colonisation more sought-after for Europeans.

In contrast to Achebe novel, I felt it gave a truer account of the culture , traditions, and religion but did not focus much on the internal conflict of its protagonist rather on the external conflict that occurred due to the changing economy and society brought by the missionaries. However, in comparison the reading and novel both complemented each other when where one world lack in certain information the other would make up for it and each had their own perspective. Each also had their own strengths and weakness, such as mentioned in before, even though the information provided was significant to understand conflict at the height of the scramble for Africa, I think both works are outdated since Africa has since evolved since the 19th century however still I believe that these two help readers understand conflict through different lens. In conclusion, in Things Falls Apart, shows some



aspects of the Igbo culture are retained while other aspects are discarded when two cultures intertwine.

In *Resistance and Collaboration in Southern and Central Africa c 1850-1920* shows the complexity of colonisation and the aspects of resistance and collaboration between conquest states seeking to expand their territories and impose their economic and political structures upon weaker states they attempt to control. The overall point of the novel made was that stronger and powerful culture will always dominate and manipulate the weaker culture and how colonisation tears apart the very things that hold groups and societies together and replaces it something with entirely different with whether good or bad consequences. Bibliography Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. 2nd. New York: Anchor, 1994.

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