

# Chinua achebe's portrayal of pre- colonial africa:

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



The concept of balance in Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is an important theme throughout the book. Achebe introduces this idea with an excerpt from William Butler Yeats's poem, "The Second Coming." The notion of balance is stressed here as important, because if balance does not exist, order is lost. This novel is a complex portrait of African tribal society prior to European colonization. By employing masterful techniques of description, linguistic comparison and strong proverbial context, a chance is given to the reader to realize the rich traditions and customs that generated stability in that society. There are many structures of balance that the Ibo culture seems to depend upon. All of which contribute to the demise of the main character, Okonkwo, the Ibo religion, and ultimately, the Ibos' autonomy. This unraveling of affairs is spearheaded by a tremendous imbalance between notably masculine and feminine concepts. These yin and yang aspects, so to speak, might well be described as the external, physical strength of the male, opposed by the internal, passive strength of the female. Achebe formulates a brilliant dichotomy here. It will be the purpose of this essay to investigate these forces and to clarify Achebe's statement of the Western viewpoint of African culture, history and language. Okonkwo, often compared and contrasted to many Western heroes, was born the son of Unoka. Unoka was known to be indolent and unsuitably idle. He preferred to stay at home playing his flute, drinking, and socializing, rather than toiling to cultivate and maintain the crops needed to support his family. Because of this, his father never had enough money, and his family went hungry. He carried a high level of debt in order to maintain this lifestyle. "If any money came his way . . . he immediately bought gourds of palm wine, called round

his neighbors and made merry" (Achebe 4). Okonkwo perceived this as an imbalance toward the female, or passive, side of his father's character. Remaining home and not using one's strength to provide for the family is characteristic of how women behave. He works hard to rebuke Unoko's errant ways. Thus, Okonkwo rejects his father, and consequently, the feminine side of himself. He becomes a star wrestler and warrior in his tribe to provide for his family at a very young age. At the same time, he starts a new farm and begins to accumulate his own wealth, and eventually a title. His hard work proves itself in his success, and he soon becomes prominent and respected in his tribe. Having attained wealth, many wives and children, he feels that he has dominated over his father's feminine follies. His big ambition is to become one of the powerful elders of the tribe. Okonkwo feels stable and secure in his pursuit of masculinity in its extremes. However, it soon becomes apparent that not everything is ideal. His son, Nwoye, is not quite living up to the expectations of becoming a man. "Nwoye . . . was already causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness" (Achebe 12). He favors his mother, preferring to listen to the women's stories, and is somewhat adverse to his father's tales of battle and victory. Nwoye has many qualms about the practices of the tribe, thus making him very susceptible when missionaries come to Umuofia. Nwoye is attracted to the Christian religion of the white man because of its unqualified acceptance of everyone. This recognition seems to Nwoye to be as unconditional as a mother's love for her child. Nwoye's conversion devastates Okonkwo. Although he has been harsh with his son, he still believes in Nwoye's potential to become a great clansman. Nwoye's rejection of Ibo values,

however, strikes the dire blow to Okonkwo's hopes for him. In addition, Nwoye's actions undermine Okonkwo's own status and prestige, already damaged by his exile. It is, as Okonkwo thinks at the end of Chapter Seventeen, as though all of his hard work to distance himself from the legacy of his father is destroyed. Of this, Okonkwo reflects, "Living fire begets cold impotent ash" (Achebe 153), where fire is the powerful, destructive, male force, and ashes the inert, weak, female force. Okonkwo sets to return to Umuofia proud and confident despite the tragedy of his son's grave transgression. He dreams of regaining his status, "[seeing] clearly the high esteem in which he [will] be held, and he even [sees] himself taking the highest title in the land" (Achebe 172). When he does return home, he finds that the church has changed things so much, that few take any interest at all. He has hoped that his daughter's marriages would help to bring him some reflected glory but, again, this does not garner Umuofia's attention. The opportunity to be a warrior once again soon presents itself to Okonkwo. This is his last chance to recapture some of his lost glory. His motivations for wanting revenge, including his humiliation in jail, are deeply personal. Having been imprisoned for properly delivering tribal justice, Okonkwo prepares to act alone after being released. He dons the customary war dress, remembering his former magnificence in battle. The events of the past couple of days have brought leaders from all of the clan's nine tribes to a meeting the morning after Okonkwo and the other egwuwu are released. He strikes out at one of the court messengers sent to break up the meeting, and kills him with a swift blow of his machete. Okonkwo's fate is sealed, as the tribe does not respond in favor of his action. He wipes his machete clean and

leaves to take his own life. Unoka's words ring true in this discourse. "A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone" (Achebe 24-25). In fact, this serves as a fatalistic prediction of all the losses that Okonkwo experiences despite his constant efforts to distance himself from the model of indolence and irresponsibility that his father gave him. He values his personal success and status over the survival of the community and, having risen to the top of the clan's economic and political hierarchy alone, he fails alone. Okonkwo's lack of concern for the fate of his community is manifested when, before the clan-wide meeting, he doesn't bother to exchange greetings with anyone. He is ultimately only concerned about his own fate. Despite his life of hard work and the wealth and prestige, he dies alone in disgrace, as had his father. The ignominy is even carried through after his death, as the action of his suicide is deemed "an offense against the Earth" (Achebe 207). Therefore, he is denied a proper burial and decency even in death. Thus is how "things fall apart" for Okonkwo. The Ibo religion falls in much the same way. This religion is centered about the worship of male gods and ancestors. The female god among these may be the Earth goddess, but Okonkwo offends this goddess three times in the story to save his masculine image. He does this when he beats his wife during the week of peace, when he strikes down his adopted son, and again when he inadvertently kills Ezeudu's son. The irony of his crimes is that they are committed in effort to assert his masculinity. The latter being the gravest. Killing a fellow clansman "was a crime of two kinds, male and female" (Achebe 124). Okonkwo committed the female, which meant it was

unintentional<sup>2E</sup> This misfortune leads to his exile and eventual downfall. The gods' functions are mainly to help in war, and to aid the yearly yam harvest, which is considered a man's crop. The highest members in the religious organization, the egwuwu, are the most respected men in the society; during ceremonies, they get into costumes and play the role of the previously mentioned ancestors. Women do not participate in these customary ceremonies. The primary influence women have in this religion is in the role of the oracle, a woman, who embodies a male god. It is the women, also, who practice witchcraft, which is greatly feared in the tribes, but it should be noted that even this is a passive force with only intangible connections to any physical effects. In the novel, Chielo serves this function well and even garners the respect of the tribe that elevates her above the feminine station allotted to woman. With the introduction of the Christian religion, which preaches universal acceptance, many members of the clan who are dissatisfied with the Ibo religion are drawn toward it. Some of the title-less men, or efulefu, who are described as 'women' in the tribe, soon become the most zealous of converts. Nwoye dislikes the practice of exposing supposedly evil twin babies in the woods, and feels that the senseless killing of Ikemefuna was wrong. This discontent with Ibo tradition immediately draws him to the new religion because it preaches that killing the innocent is wrong. This acceptance of all embodies what a leader of the people of Okonkwo's motherland said about the nature of the mother. Uchendu says to Okonkwo, "When there is sorrow and bitterness [a man] finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you" (134). These ideas filled a gap for many tribesmen that the Ibo religion could not fill, since it was so

unbalanced toward the male. The Ibo religion thereafter grew less powerful. The missionaries also on several accounts test the taboos of the Ibo religion. Among these digressions are the killing of the sacred python, the *efulefu* cutting their hair, and the building of the church in the Evil Forest. These direct challenges of traditional belief are dually resounding and only serve to contribute further to the downfall of the Ibo's sacred traditions. Eventually the tribesmen attempt to reverse this by killing and burning down the church, but the white man has taken hold. The attempt ends in failure, the hero dies shamefully and most of the tribe is converted. In effect, Achebe uses religion to demonstrate how "things fall apart." In general, the way of life that the Ibo have enjoyed over many generations disintegrates from the influence of the European missionaries. Some of the wise elders say that Umuofia is getting weaker because the tribes have failed to intermix the way they once had, and instead are in constant competition with each other. Uchendu suggests this to Obierika when he visits Okonkwo during his exile by saying, "Those were the good days when a man had friends in distant clans. Your generation does not know that. You stay at home, afraid of your next-door neighbor" (Achebe 137). Few of the tribal people understand the importance of the saying "mother is supreme," and therefore lose connection with their motherland. Okonkwo encourages his son to lose his connection with his own mother in favor of the connection with his father and thus his masculine side. In addition, when Okonkwo's daughter comes of the age to marry, Okonkwo feels it best not to deny the many suitors from his motherland, in order to have her marry someone in his fatherland. He does this in order to gain a better position there. Even within Umuofia, the tribes

were so unfamiliar with each other, that they find some customs to be quite strange and foreign. All these things serve to drive the tribes of Umuofia apart, creating an extreme imbalance between masculine and feminine forces. This sets them against each other, so that when a foreign influence is introduced, they are not able to come together and help each other. When the first missionary comes to Umuofia, he was killed because of the male ideas to dispatch unknown, foreign evils. The white man retaliates quickly by sending out soldiers and guns to annihilate the offending tribe. This serves as an example how male power could so easily fail when imbalanced. Soon, more missionaries come, but the Ibo allow them to stay because of what had happened before. The missionaries appeal for land to build a church on. In an attempt discourage the missionaries, the tribe allows its construction in the Evil Forest. Their beliefs assure them of the white man's eventual failure, but this is only serves the missionaries purpose of discrediting their religion when they ultimately survive. Perhaps this feminine, or unknown, attribute of the evil woods allows the church to stand unaffected and even flourish despite the evils surrounding it. Here the author uses dialectic images to symbolize the descriptions of day and night. It might be apparent that the night belongs to the female, and the day belongs to the male. It is during the day that the males do their deeds. At night, they return home to the comfort of their wives' cooking and the comfort of their beds. It is also at night that the Oracle was most active, as was the witch. The men feared the night and all of the unknown things that dwelt there. However, during the night, the Oracle and the witch fearlessly walked the woods and practiced their magic. It might also be argued that the woods are also part of the night, for this is



where the unknown evils lurk that might place indescribable hexes upon any intruders. Twin babies, committers of evil deeds, and the evil ogbanja spirits that haunted mothers were all thrown into the evil woods. The fear of the unknown and the practice of committing it as feminine create more imbalances on which the fate of the Ibo ultimately hinges. The white man's introduction of their form of government is also displayed as evil in itself. The author seems to point this out, since the government imposed its own laws and ways upon the people without knowing anything about their own. This government had the power to enforce these laws with sheer physical power. Perhaps Achebe is also criticizing this disbalance of the masculine and feminine, but, in any case, the tribes' own physical power proves ineffectual against it, and in the end, they submit to these foreign influences, becoming subjects of the British Empire instead. By the time things begin to fall apart, it becomes clear that what the colonialists have unraveled is the complex Ibo culture, from one individual to the community as a whole. The author definitely suggests that there is a balance to all systems, and that when that balance is lost, the system is reduced to chaos. This imbalance can be traced down to an inequity between masculine and feminine forces. It must be considered as something analogous, on a similar didactic scale, and something to do with order versus entropy. In the quotation of Yeats's poem, this comes into play when the falconer loses control of the falcon as it spirals up into the skies. It is difficult to say what the outcome might have been if these forces had been more in harmony. It could be questioned what would have happened if Okonkwo had not offended the earth goddess and gained a position as a leader of the clan. In addition, it might be asked what would

have occurred if his ambition had not pushed him in this perilous direction in the first place. Other questions arise regarding whether the Ibo religion could satisfy its constituents enough so that foreign influence did not become a threat; or whether as a whole, united completely, the Ibo could have stood up against the external influence and military power of the Europeans. Achebe does not seem to offer responses to these issues. He also does not infer that things would have been different if the Ibo could have been resistant to the ideas introduced by the foreigners. The author merely laments the death of this culture in spite of its weaknesses, and strives to counter the negative and stereotypical view of traditional African culture. Things Fall Apart is presented in English from the viewpoint of the Ibo culture. It deals with how individual characters as well as the society as a whole deals with change. Achebe creates a masterpiece that presents the significance of balance. He argues that when this balance is lost, chaos ensues, and indeed, things fall apart.