

Chinua achebe's views of the "savage" in things fall apart

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The subtlety and complexity of African tribal communities is captured well in Chinua Achebe's book, *Things Fall Apart* (1994, New York: Anchor Books).

The book explodes the myth created by early Western or European writers about Africans being "noble savages." Cultural understanding is a key lesson from this book, which shows that a society's integrity and survival is dependent on the intertwining of its social institutions including culture. One cannot carelessly pass judgment on the ways of another people.

Different communities do things differently and the book illustrates this.

Things fall apart for some peoples, as it were, not because their particular ways of doing things are inferior but because the clashing of different cultures could lead to tragic changes. The book of Achebe speaks for the colonized who describes the colonizer thus: "He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." Published in 1958, *Things Fall Apart* tells the story of Okonkwo whose tragic life is set at the time of the European colonization of Africa.

Okonkwo is of the tribe Igbo whose rituals and practices are described with provision of the proper meanings that are embedded in or suggested by such practices. By "proper" it is meant that those are the meanings that the Africans themselves have of those practices. Achebe includes detailed descriptions of the justice codes and the trial process, the social and family rituals, the marriage customs, food production and preparation processes, the process of shared leadership for the community, religious beliefs and practices, and the opportunities for virtually every man to climb the clan's ladder of success through his own efforts.

Achebe also bares for us the motivations and desires of Okonkwo whose dreams are fundamentally no different from that of other individuals in other cultures. The character of Okonkwo dreams of family, peace and happiness, love and understanding. Achebe placed this tragic character in the context of a clash of cultures and this clash led to Okonkwo's suicide, an unacceptable act in his tribe. Here we cite three selected quotes from the book that suggest the author's regard of an African tribe's traditions, culture and perspectives.

First, regarding " conversation," which is a very cultural material, Achebe writes: " Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten. " This short and crisp description suggests much appreciation of an Igbo tradition. This quote from the narrator's recounting in the first Chapter pertains to the sophisticated art of rhetoric practiced by the tribe. The metaphor of words as food is something an anthropologist might expect given the almost exclusively agricultural nature of Igbo society.

Food was valued for sustenance of physical life while words sustained social interaction and hence community life. Here is another quote: Does the white man understand our custom about land? How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay.

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. This comes from an exchange between Obierika and Okonkwo at the end of Chapter Twenty which deals with events that have come to pass since the arrival of the colonizers. The lines basically point at the unreasonableness of belittling unfamiliar customs. Finally, here is an illustrative scene in the life of the Igbo tribe: As night fell, burning torches were set on wooden tripods and the young men raised a song.

The elders sat in a circle and the singers went round singing each man's praise as they came before him. They had something to say for every man. Some were great farmers, some were orators who spoke for the clan. Okonkwo was the greatest wrestler and warrior alive. When they had gone round the circle they settled down in the centre, and girls came from the inner compound to dance. At first the bride was not among them. But when she finally appeared holding a cock in her right hand, a loud cheer rose from the crowd. All the other dancers made way for her. She presented the cock to the musicians and began to dance.

Her brass anklets rattled as she danced and her body gleamed with cam wood in the soft yellow light. The musicians with their wood, clay and metal instruments went from song to song. And they were all gay. " This happy image and more just had to be described in the novel as it contrasts with the dreadful end that came to pass. The end for Okonkwo enhances the imageries sketched for the readers in the book. One is left unsettled, at the least, with Okonkwo's passing. Achebe's character Okonkwo and the Igbo

tribe did fall apart but not before the author gave us excellent descriptions of what was a very proud man and his equally proud people.