

IT
 BEGAN TO
 DAWN ON ME THAT
 ALTHOUGH FICTION WAS
 UNDOUBTEDLY FICTITIOUS IT
 COULD ALSO BE TRUE OR FALSE,
 NOT WITH THE TRUTH OR
 FALSEHOOD OF A NEWS
 ITEM BUT AS TO ITS
 DISINTERESTEDNESS,
 ITS INTENTION, ITS
 INTEGRITY.

—Chinua
 Achebe in
*Home and
 Exile*,
 p. 33–34

Unit 1—Lesson 1

Chinua Achebe

INTRODUCTION

The Lions Produce Their Own Historian: Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe (CHEE-noo-ah ah-CHEH-beh) is probably the most well-known African writer, and *Things Fall Apart* is the most popular African novel. As a young man, Achebe read these words in a European novel about Africa:

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. . . . But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse.

We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were traveling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories.

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being

a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Chapter 2).

How do these paragraphs show Africans? Are they presented as individual, valuable people, created by God like anyone else? Or as something almost inhuman, out of man's primitive, "ugly" past? When Chinua Achebe was studying English literature at University College, Ibadan, Nigeria, around 1950, he read *Heart of Darkness* and other novels about Africa, written by Europeans. He found Africans presented as primitive, animal-like, barely human. When his class read Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, proclaimed by *Time* magazine in 1952 as "the best novel ever written about Africa," Achebe says, "One of my classmates stood up and told an astounded teacher point-blank that the only moment he had enjoyed in the entire book was when the Nigerian hero, Johnson, was shot to death by his British master, Mr. Rudbeck." Achebe calls the "hero" a "bumbling idiot" and an "embarrassing nitwit." As he read other Western books about Africa, he found an undercurrent of racism, "distaste, hatred, and mockery" (*Home and Exile*, p. 22–24). He explains this phenomenon later in the same book as the desire of the enslaver and the conqueror to justify himself, by saying that the conquered people are inefficient, primitive, foolish, subhuman. Elsewhere he proposes that the West, in its insecurity, seeks to reassure itself by comparing itself with black, evil Africa. In any case, Achebe believes that, "Until the lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter" (*Home and Exile*, p. 73).

Achebe's work is a good example of what is called post-colonial literature. *The Empire Writes Back* is the title of a book about such literature. Post-colonial literature is the literature of former colonies (sometimes written while they were still colonies) in which the authors from those countries respond to the experience of colonization and express ideas that are different from the assumptions of the colonizing powers. Much of African literature has responded to colonialism and its effects on African society and traditions.

Achebe set out to write a book to "teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them." His first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, tells the story of an Ibo* man, describes his world and his traditional beliefs, and it shows the changes brought about by the arrival of white missionaries and administrators. Achebe was well-equipped for this task. He was born in Nigeria in 1930 and grew up in a Christian family. His father, Isaiah, was an evangelist and teacher for the Church Missionary Society. Chinua was educated in the CMS school in his native tongue, Ibo*, and in English. He devoured Christian and British classics. Although he only began learning English at school when he was eight years old, his friends soon called him "Dictionary" because of his knowledge of English. The British still controlled Nigeria at that time. Chinua not only learned the Christian faith at home and at school, but he learned Ibo tales, traditions, and history from his mother's stories. He describes his family this way:

*Ibo is now called Igbo, a more accurate spelling. However, I have usually used Ibo in this guide as that is the spelling used in *Things Fall Apart*.

Both my parents were strong and even sometimes uncompromising in their Christian beliefs, but they were not fanatical. Their lives were ruled, I think, as much by reason as by faith; as much by common sense and compassion as by doctrine. My father's half-brother was not the only heathen in our extended family; if anything, he was among the majority. Our home was open to them all, and my father received his peers and relatives—Christian or not—with kola nut and palm-wine in that piazza, just as my mother received her visitors in the parlour. It was from the conversations and disagreements in these rooms, especially the piazza, that I learned much of what I know and have come to value about my history and culture (*Home and Exile*, p. 10–11).

Among other stories, Achebe learned about his great-grandfather, who, when he took the third highest title, gave out food at cooking places which he set up all along the road for two miles. His great-grandfather's name, Osinyi, means “someone who cooks more than the whole town can eat.”

Achebe describes himself as growing up at a crossroads. His father grew up in the traditions of Igbo life before becoming a Christian. His children are more a part of international culture. Achebe sees himself as interpreting the past for those living in the present.

After completing his college degree in liberal arts, Achebe went to work in radio broadcasting, trying to help Nigerians develop a national identity. In 1958, *Things Fall Apart* was published. Achebe had sent it to a British publisher, Heinemann, who at first didn't know what to do with it. However, one daring director saw it as an opportunity to start something new and began the African Writers Series. This series has been crucial in getting many African works published and making them available to the world, and it has encouraged other publishers to begin publishing African writing. As editor of the series, Achebe was able to help and encourage many African authors.

Achebe has gone on to write other novels about the struggles of Nigeria during and after colonialism. *No Longer at Ease* (1960) shows Okonkwo's descendant dealing with bribery and corruption. In *Arrow of God* (1964), an Ibo priest struggles against colonial rulers and his own people. *A Man of the People* (1966) shows the greed, violence, and corruption of post-colonial Nigerian politicians. *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) shows how power corrupts a strong leader who begins with good intentions. Achebe has also written nonfiction, poetry, children's stories, short stories, and other novels. He is sometimes called the “father of African literature.”

Achebe says his work, overall, has an important message:

This theme—put quite simply—is that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and beauty, that they had poetry, and above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African



LESSON

PREVIEW

Historical fiction involves us in the lives and culture of people of a certain place and time, and shows how historical events affect individual people.

people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain (*Nigeria Magazine*, quoted in Ogbaa, p. 167).

Truly, Achebe is the “lion’s historian,” showing the other side of the European “hunt” to take over Africa.

THE SELECTION

Things Fall Apart is Achebe’s first, and most famous, novel. It shows the unity and diversity of Ibo (or Igbo) culture with its traditions, proverbs, stories, and relationships; and it shows the way “things fell apart” when white missionaries and administrators arrived in that area of Nigeria. Okonkwo, the hero, is a powerful, ambitious, yet insecure man. His dreams of honor and power in his clan are dashed by changes he cannot control.

Historical Background

This novel takes place in the late 1800s, when the British were just beginning to take over Nigeria (which was not yet a country). In the 1600s, the British began visiting the Nigerian coast to take slaves. Slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1807. But the British continued to trade for Nigerian groundnuts, cotton, cocoa, rubber, and palm oil. The palm oil was used in the factories of the Industrial Revolution. The British annexed Lagos in 1861 and extended their rule until in 1914 they were governing the whole “Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria.” The area they put together includes more than 250 ethnic groups with distinct languages and cultures. In 1960, Nigeria became an independent nation. There are about 20 million Ibo in southeastern Nigeria today. They tried to secede from Nigeria and form an independent nation, Biafra, in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–70. Achebe was involved in trying to get international support for Biafra. However, Biafra lost the war and the country was reunited. The Ibo (Igbo) are the third largest people group in Nigeria, after the Hausa-Fulani in the northern areas (these are two people groups, Hausa and Fulani; but they have intermixed so much that they are often considered as one), and the Yoruba in the southwestern part of the country.

Major Characters

Since the names are unfamiliar to you, and are sometimes similar, I list the major characters here for your reference:

- Okonkwo: the main character
- Unoka: his father
- Ekwefi: one of his wives
- Ezinma: daughter of Okonkwo and Ekwefi
- Nwoye: one of Okonkwo's sons
- Ikemefuna: a hostage boy who lives for three years with Okonkwo
- Chielo: priestess of the god Agbala
- Obierika: Okonkwo's closest friend
- Uchendu: Okonkwo's uncle (his mother's brother)
- Missionaries, in order of appearance: Mr. Kiaga (African), Mr. Brown, Rev. Smith

WHILE YOU READ

Consider these questions as you read *Things Fall Apart*:

- What does this novel show you about African history?
- What do you learn from it about the culture, society, and government of the Ibo people?
- What is positive and what is negative about Okonkwo's character?
- What is positive and what is negative about the influences of the British who come to Umuofia?
- How are the culture and values of characters in this book similar to, and different from, your own?
- What motivates the characters in this book; why do they act and react as they do?

Please use the Glossary in the back of *Things Fall Apart* to look up unfamiliar words, and read the explanatory Notes on each section which accompany the Comprehension Questions below.

NOTE: You should be working already on obtaining an autobiography for Unit 4. See Appendix B.

African Literature

For many generations, most African “literature” was not written down; it was transmitted orally from generation to generation. Poetry was usually chanted or sung and included praise songs about chiefs and kings, historical poetry listing lineage and towns, hunters’ songs, children’s rhymes, and magic spells. People of various African civilizations also created and passed down myths, folktales, proverbs, riddles, histories, and legends of cultural heroes. According to *World Book Encyclopedia*, in Africa, “Oral literature has a role in religious ceremonies and serves to record the past, to teach morals and traditions to young people, and to glorify political leaders. It is often recited to music before family groups or larger audiences.”

African folktales are often trickster stories. In some areas a hare is the hero; in other areas, a tortoise or a spider, a man or even a god are the tricksters who cunningly oppose others and sometimes defeat themselves by being too tricky! The Uncle Remus stories about Brer Rabbit and his friends are based on these African trickster tales. Some stories are dilemma tales in which the audience has to supply the ending. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica 2003*, “A variant of the trickster tale is the escape story, in which the hero extricates himself from an impossible task by imposing an impossible condition. One such story tells how a cruel king of Benin ordered his subjects on pain of death to build a new palace but to start at the top and build downward. All were in despair until one wise old man went to the king and said that they were now ready to begin and asked him, according to tradition, to lay the foundation stone.”

Proverbs and riddles are also an important part of the African oral tradition. Proverbs are “the palm-oil with which words are eaten,” according to the Ibo. They express people’s accumulated wisdom, give a code of behavior, and enable people to communicate indirectly, without confronting or affronting people, but stating important principles. Riddles are generally statements which are a puzzle. For instance, what do you think this Yoruba riddle means: “We tie a horse in the house, but its mane flies above the roof.” (It is a picture of fire or smoke.)

Missionaries and anthropologists have recorded some African oral literature, and today Africans are also involved in preserving their heritage. Amos Tutuola, a Yoruba, has included Yoruban myths and folktales in his books, such as *The Palm-Wine Drunkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. In 1911, the Reverend Carl Christian Reindorf, from Ghana, used oral traditions to write a history of the Gold Coast and Asante. Many modern African writers intertwine oral traditions, proverbs, and folktales with their stories and poetry, as Achebe does in his novels.

Some areas of Africa have had a written language and literature since early times. From at least the fourth century A.D., the Ethiopian Coptic Church used the Ge'ez language to write church liturgy, the Bible, the lives of saints, and religious poetry. Muslim areas of Africa, particularly North Africa, have a long tradition of literature written in Arabic. Since the mid-seventeenth century, poetry has been written in Swahili, a language used in much of East Africa.

In the early twentieth century, many African writers, educated by the colonial powers, began writing plays, novels, and poetry in English, French, or Portuguese. Using these European languages gave them a much wider market for their work and easier access to publishers and printers. (See “International Writing in English” in Unit 2.) The first known English account by an African is *The Interesting Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, published in 1789. It is an autobiography of an Igbo man who describes his life in Africa (Benin) and his enslavement and emancipation. Some African writers have chosen in recent years to write in their own languages, including Kikuyu, Hausa (of northern Nigeria and Niger), Amharic (of Ethiopia), Shona (of Zimbabwe), Somali, Swahili, Yoruba (of Nigeria), and Zulu. Africa is a continent of many countries, languages, and people groups. These African writers believe that writing in their own languages may help their people and their countries to develop their identities as nations which recognize and appreciate their unique cultures and histories.

Some of the earliest modern African literature was a reaction to colonial rule. Leopold Senghor, a poet from Senegal, joined with black writers from the French Caribbean in the 1930s and began the movement called *Négritude*, which protested French colonial rule and the idea that Africans should be assimilated into European culture. They claimed that Western culture was soulless and out of step with nature, and called black Africans “the leaven that the white flour needs.” Senghor later became the first president of Senegal. Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono, from Cameroon, wrote novels aiming to explode the “French colonial myth” which stated that the people of the French colonies were simply black Frenchmen, not Africans under colonial rule. One factor that helped lead to the independence of Angola was the militant poetry, in Portuguese, of Mario Pinto de Andrade and Agostinho Neto.

Much modern African literature focuses on cross-cultural conflict. It may explore the differences between traditional culture and Westernized modern culture and the alienation that young people, educated in Western ways, experience from their families and homes. Some of Achebe's novels explore this theme. Other modern African literature focuses on religious conflicts between tribal religions and Christianity. James Thiong'o Ngugi of Kenya was the first East African to write a major novel in English. *Weep Not, Child* tells the story of a boy who puts his hope in education and the Christian God; but as he grows up during the violence of the Mau Mau War, he gradually loses his

faith. Ngugi later adopted his Kikuyu name, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and began to write in his native language, Kikuyu (or Gikuyu). In Ngugi's novel *The River Between*, Waikayi, the son of a tribal "seer," tries to unite the Christians in his clan with those who follow traditional customs. Traditional Gikuyus consider circumcision for both boys and girls a necessary passage to adulthood, but Christians in their community consider it a sin. In the end, there is a "river" between the two; no common ground can be found. Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions* shows a black African girl who gets the opportunity to study in white mission schools and thus improve her condition in life. However, she finds herself more and more alienated from her family and her roots and begins to question who she is. Two Muslim Sudanese authors, Sheikh Hamidou Kane and Yambo Ouologuem, wrote philosophical novels, partly in the form of dialogues, comparing Islam and Western materialism, and comparing Christian compassion and traditional autocracy.

Race relations are an important theme in many places, especially South Africa. Writers expressed their opposition to apartheid (rigid legal separation of races) through autobiographies, novels, short stories, and poetry. Some of the many black South African authors are Bloke Modisane, Alfred Hutchinson, Alex La Guma, Mazisi Kunene, and the playwright Lewis Nkosi who wrote *The Rhythm of Violence*. Many writers went into exile, but continued to write scathing indictments of apartheid until it was abolished in 1991.

Another important theme of African literature today is the stresses within urban African society, especially political corruption and inefficiency in African governments. Ben Okri, a Nigerian novelist who uses "magic realism," Chinua Achebe (in *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*), and the Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, all express disillusionment with modern Africa. The first black African to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1986, was the Nigerian Yoruba playwright Wole Soyinka. Some of his plays are satirical and light, mocking pompous, Westernized schoolteachers and clever, grasping preachers. Others are serious and even tragic, showing flaws in modern Nigerian society and government and attacking colonialism. He uses Yoruba folklore and religion as well as Western ideas in his plays. Soyinka spent two years in jail for trying to stop the Nigerian civil war in 1967. His autobiography, about his childhood, is listed in Lesson 7 of this guide.

Some African writers focus on women's issues. *Second-Class Citizen*, written by Buchi Emecheta from Nigeria, tells the sad story of an Ibo woman who moves to England to live with her student husband. She faces both discrimination from English society and the oppressive demands of her Nigerian husband; she feels that she is a "second-class citizen" both in her Nigerian life at home and in British society outside her home. Bessie Head, from Botswana, wrote *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village*

Tales, which ranges from folklore to modern stories. Some stories show the tragedies of modern life, such as a boy killed by a truck representing “progress, development.” Others show the consequences, especially for women, of a society where sexual promiscuity is accepted. Some show the results of deep poverty, the effects of witchcraft, and conflicts between various forms of Christianity and tribal beliefs. Flora Nwapa’s novel *Efuru*, based on an old folktale of a woman “chosen by the gods,” is the tragic story of an Ibo woman named Efuru. Efuru’s first husband deserts her, then her daughter dies, Efuru remarries, her husband takes a second wife because she does not bear children, she becomes ill and is accused of adultery, and finally she leaves her husband. Like Achebe, Nwapa includes customs and proverbs, and she also includes the continuing practice of men and women taking titles. Again, the effects of grinding poverty and of men’s unfaithfulness are vividly shown. Fauziya Kassindja’s autobiography *Do They Hear You When You Cry?* protests both the custom in Togo of female circumcision and the difficulties she faced seeking asylum in the United States.

Other novelists besides Achebe have written historical novels about their past from their perspective. Solomon Mutsaers has written novels in the Shona language about Zimbabwe’s struggle for independence. The Ethiopian writers Abbe Gubanna and Birhanu Zarihun have written historical fiction about the reign of their nineteenth-century emperor Tewodros II, who attempted, unsuccessfully, to unify and modernize Ethiopia. Zulu novelists R. R. R. Dhlomo, Leonard Mncwango, and Muntu Xulu have written about Zulu kings and prophets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the Zulu king Cetshwayo who resisted the British and wiped out a British regiment. (The movie *Zulu Dawn* graphically shows this battle.)

In Achebe’s words,

Everywhere new ways to write about Africa have appeared, reinvesting the continent and its people with humanity, free at last of those stock situations and stock characters, ‘never completely human,’ that had dominated European writing about Africa for hundred of years. The new literature that erupted so dramatically and so abundantly in the 1950s and 1960s showed great variety in subject matter, in style of presentation and, let’s face it, in levels of skill and accomplishment. But there was one common thread running through it all: the thread of a shared humanity linking the author to the world of his creation; a sense that even in the most tempting moments of grave disappointment with this world, the author remains painfully aware that he is of the same flesh and blood, the same humanity as its human inhabitants” (*Home and Exile*, p. 49).

COMPREHENSION NOTES AND QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 1–3 NOTES

***1 Titles:** Ibo men gained honor and influence in their community by taking “titles,” such as Ozo, Idemili, Omalo, and Erulu. When they reached a certain level of wealth, they would host feasts with music and dancing, make sacrifices, and give away much of that wealth, gaining instead a title. This was a way of redistributing wealth in the community, and honored those who were diligent and generous. It was very rare to take a fifth title, which made a man a king; he had to pay the debts of everyone in the community. A person with the first title could mark his big toe with chalk, as Okoye does in Chapter 1. In Chapter 11 of Flora Nwapa’s novel *Efuru*, set in twentieth century Nigeria, a poor man takes a title, using up money which should have repaid a debt or paid for the next season’s plowing, because, he says, “You know how much I was humiliated by the members of my age-group who took titles.” His wife rebukes him and asks, “Are you richer now that you have taken the title? Is it a sin to be poor? Are the members of your age-group who laughed at you your *chi*?” (your destiny; see below). Ibo women can also take titles.

1 Cowries: seashells used as money.

1 Yams: The yams referred to are not the orange, sweet potato-like yams eaten in America. African yams are white inside, starchy and stringy, and are huge; they may be a foot long or more. They can be roasted, fried, boiled, or pounded into a mash, called foo-foo. Coco-yams are a brown root vegetable also called taro. Cassava is a shrub with thick roots which is also called manioc.

1 Polygamy: “had just married his third wife”: The Igbo considered marriage and raising a family important for everyone. The more people in a household, the more workers there were for the fields; thus more food, and therefore wealth, could be produced. A wife would sometimes even bring a second wife to her husband, to increase their prosperity and to increase both his and her prestige in the community. The first wife shared in the husband’s titles and presided over the household. In Flora Nwapa’s novel *Efuru*, about modern Nigeria, a wife who cannot have children helps her husband find a second wife. She tells herself, “What is wrong with his marrying a second wife? It is only a bad woman who wants her husband all to herself.”

2 Medicine: magic or magical objects.

2 Umuofia kwenu: “United Umuofia”: The Ibo did not have a central government, but lived in self-governing communities, combined into loose confederations averaging about 5000 people. Villages were bound together by common religious shrines, like the Oracle, and by markets held every four or eight days. (Their week was four days long.) This shout is a reminder of the unity of the community. In traditional African culture, each person finds value as being part of a community that extends back through previous generations and will extend on to future generations. David Burnett, in *Clash*

*Numbers refer to chapters.

Unit 1—Lesson 1: Chinua Achebe and African Literature

of *Cultures*, says, “The person finds individual value in the assumption, ‘I am, because I participate,’ ‘I am, because we are.’ This contrasts markedly with the secular worldview, which assumes, ‘I can reason therefore I am.’ This assumption leads to the individualistic focus within secular cultures . . . [In Africa,] Important decisions are made by the community as a whole and not by individuals” (p. 62–3).

3 *Chi*: A kind of life-force, or a person’s individual fate. Also defined as spirit-double, guardian angel, guiding spirit, or personal god. In the video interview, *Chinua Achebe: Africa’s Voice*, Achebe describes *chi* as each person’s “god-agent” that may have created him, that travels with him, and is responsible for whatever happens to him. He says that a person about to come into the world chooses what kind of life he will live, and his *chi* is a witness to that choice. Then if he wants to do something and his *chi* is in agreement, it will happen easily, but if his *chi* is not in agreement (meaning he wants to change his mind about what he originally chose), it will be difficult. But he says that if you feel strongly enough about something, and say “yes” to it strongly, your *chi* will agree. For instance, a person who agreed before birth that he would not have children, will have a hard time having children, but eventually, if he wants it badly enough, he will succeed. Achebe says this concept makes the Ibo very democratic, as each person has his own *chi*, his own element of god, standing beside him. Achebe’s name Chinua is short for Chinualumogu, “My spirit (*chi*) come fight for me.”

CHAPTERS 1–3 COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. List at least five characteristics of Okonkwo that you observe in these chapters.
2. List at least five characteristics of Okonkwo’s father, Unoka.
3. Why was Okonkwo so determined to be different from his father in every way?
4. How could you best describe the government of Umuofia, as it appears in Chapter 2?
 - a. monarchy, with one man in control
 - b. oligarchy, with a council of a few men in control
 - c. democracy, with each man having a voice in government
 - d. anarchy, each person does as he or she pleases
 - e. republic, with elected representatives governing
5. Which of the following choices describe Ibo religion, based on Chapter 3?
 - a. monotheistic, worshipping one God
 - b. polytheistic, worshipping many gods
 - c. animistic, worshipping natural forces
 - d. worshipping ancestors
6. What do the people of Umuofia believe their power is based on?
7. Agbala is the priestess of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. On what matters is she consulted in Chapters 2 and 3?
8. What is involved in hospitality in Umuofia? Does it appear to have a standard structure, or is it informal?
9. The people of Umuofia made their living by agriculture. What did the men grow? What did the women grow?

CHAPTERS 4–7 NOTES

7 Twins: Many African cultures regarded the birth of twins as evil. The Ibo believed that the birth of twins was somehow abnormal and excessive. The twins would be left in the forest to die, and the mother would go through various rituals to try to prevent her from having twins again. The birth of twins was considered to be an offense against Ala, the earth goddess, who was in charge of fertility. The Ibo believed that the whole community would be harmed if the twins were kept. One of the best things the missionaries and the colonial government did was to stop the murder of twin babies.

CHAPTERS 4–7 COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. The following events took place in the regular cycle of the year in Umuofia. Put them in order by putting a number in front of each:
 - ____ Week of Peace
 - ____ Planting other crops (maize, melons, beans) at beginning of rainy season
 - ____ Season between harvest and planting (fixing houses, tapping palm trees, locusts may come) [Also called harmattan—dry, dusty season]
 - ____ Staking yams and weeding crops during rainy season
 - ____ Harvest (digging up yams, gathering firewood)
 - ____ Clearing bush for farms by cutting and burning
 - ____ Feast of the New Yam (sacrifices, feasting, wrestling)
 - ____ Preparing and planting seed-yams
 - ____ Heavy rains
2. From what you have read so far, what could shame a person in Ibo society?
3. What things does Okonkwo avoid, because he thinks they show weakness?
4. In Chapter 4, what crime does Okonkwo commit, and what does he have to do? Who was the crime against?
5. Ikemefuna at the beginning is very lonely for his family. What position does he come to hold in Okonkwo's family?
6. What is the condition of Okonkwo's gun? Why does he shoot at his wife?
7. How are events announced in Umuofia, which has no clocks?
8. How would you describe Okonkwo's family life?
9. On what occasions so far have we seen the nine villages of Umuofia united?
10. What two examples of the darkness within the Ibo traditional religion do we see at the end of Chapter 7?

CHAPTERS 8–9 NOTES

8 Bride-price: Many cultures of the world require a dowry or bride-price for marriage. In some places, such as India, the dowry is money that the bride brings into the marriage or to the groom's family. This custom was followed in parts of Europe also, until the twentieth century. In other cultures, such as Arab cultures today and the Ibo culture described here, the groom's family pays the bride's family a bride-price for the bride. In

Unit 1—Lesson 1: Chinua Achebe and African Literature

Umuofia, if the bride left the groom or behaved badly, her family or her new husband would have to repay the bride price to the groom. However, if he behaved badly, she could leave him without paying the money back. So it was costly for either of them to be unfaithful or mistreat the other. In Chapter 8, the bride's family and the groom's family negotiate a bride-price by passing a bundle of sticks back and forth, where each stick represents a bag of cowries, used as money.

- 9 *Ogbanje, iyi-uwa:*** The *Ibo* explained infant mortality with a belief in the *ogbanje* (“come and go”) child, a wicked spirit who was born into the world as an affliction, only to die soon, then come back and die again. They saw it as a curse or a punishment on the parents. They believed the cycle could be broken by a witch-doctor, who would mutilate the child after it died so that it would not want to come back again. The *iyi-uwa* was a talisman that the child supposedly buried so it could come back again after it died.

CHAPTERS 8–9 COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Okonkwo feel after he has helped to kill Ikemefuna?
2. Why does Okonkwo not believe that the dead Ogbuefi Ndulue could have been a strong man?
3. How do the Umuofians negotiate a bride-price? How is this different from two other clans mentioned?
4. Why do you think rumors say white men have no toes?
5. What had happened to Ekwefi before Ezinma's birth?
6. Why is Ekwefi so terrified when Ezinma has *iba* (probably malarial fever)? What does Okonkwo do?

CHAPTERS 10–12 COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Chapter 10 shows a court case judged by the *egwugwu*, Ibo elders dressed up as the spirits of their ancestors. How do they get the facts in the case? What do they rule? Does the ruling seem just to you?
2. The priestess takes Ezinma on a nighttime journey around the villages and to Agbala's cave. How do her parents react? What does this show you about them?
3. What does Ekwefi fear when she follows Ezinma and Agbala?
4. In Chapter 11, as she heads toward the caves, what names does Chielo call her god?
5. In Chapter 12, how is the wedding celebrated?

CHAPTERS 13–14 NOTES

- 13 Ancestors and death:** Chapter 13 says, “The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors.”

David Burnett, in his discussion of “the traditional worldview” in *Clash of Worlds*, says, “Some aspect of the ancestor’s soul is transmitted to make” [the individual] “the person who he is, and as such he has a responsibility to ancestors. He is only because they were. The ancestors are therefore superior to him, and every person has a responsibility to his or her ancestors. Death is not the end. It is the change of existence in which the person moves from the world of the living to become a part of the world of the ancestors” (p. 61).

- 13 “So I shall ask you to come again the way you came before.”** The Ibo believed that each child was a reincarnation of part of an ancestor’s spirit. When the person died, sacrifices had to be offered to cleanse his soul, so that it could rejoin the other part of that spirit in the spirit world, and later be reincarnated again.

“A second burial rite enables him to rejoin the other half of his spirit in the spirit world, thus making him a whole ancestor again, and ready to be reincarnated in the future” (Ogbaa, p. 133).

- 13 Defilement and Cleansing:** Making something unclean, impure, shameful. Western culture has lost the emphasis on ceremonial cleanness and avoiding defilement, but the Bible has a great deal to say about it, especially in Leviticus and Numbers. In the Bible, defilement could come from many sources, including killing someone in war, touching a dead body, and idolatry. Bloodshed, adultery, sacrificing children to idols, and other sins could make the whole land unclean. Cleansing from defilement could be made by sacrifices, ceremonial washing, or sometimes exile. In Ibo society, the following were some of the abominations against the earth goddess, bringing defilement: giving birth to twins, murder, adultery, suicide, incest, and rape. In Ibo culture, cleansing was performed by animal sacrifices (or even human sacrifices) and offerings to the gods, burning the offender’s home, and exile. Denial of burial was another punishment for offenses against the earth goddess, as in the case of Okonkwo’s father.
- 13 Exile:** In cultures where identity comes from being part of a community, the ultimate punishment may be exile; exclusion from the community makes a person feel that he is “nobody,” without value or identity.

CHAPTERS 13–14 COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Okonkwo and his family suddenly face a huge change. Why?
2. Why did the Ibo believe a person who had committed murder, even accidentally, had to be exiled, and his possessions burned?
3. Okonkwo is depressed and discouraged when he has to leave all he has accomplished and go to his mother’s village. How does Okonkwo’s uncle, Uchendu, explain to him the importance of his motherland?
4. “For whom is it well, for whom is it well? There is no one for whom it is well.” Why does Uchendu quote this song to Okonkwo?
5. So far, the book has shown us many traits that the Ibo value highly. Which traits, out of the following, would you say they value most?

Unit 1—Lesson 1: Chinua Achebe and African Literature

- a. courage
 - b. gentleness
 - c. generosity
 - d. thrift
 - e. unity
 - f. individualism
 - g. kindness
 - h. strength
 - i. humility
 - j. social standing
 - k. hard work
 - l. restfulness
6. The author says, “Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.” Proverbs are obviously a very important part of communication in Ibo culture. They are used to communicate indirectly rather than directly. Choose two or more of the following proverbs used in the book, and tell what you think they mean. You may give an English equivalent if you can think of one.
- a. “A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing.”
 - b. “Eneke the bird says that since men have learned to shoot without missing, he has learned to fly without perching.”
 - c. “A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness.”
 - d. “Looking at a king’s mouth, one would think he never sucked at his mother’s breast.”
 - e. “Those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble.”
 - f. “When a man says yes his *chi* says yes also.”
 - g. “They called him the little bird *nza* who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his *chi*.”
 - h. “When a mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth.”
 - i. “A man who makes trouble for others is also making it for himself.”
 - j. “If one finger brought oil it soiled the others.”

CHAPTERS 15–18 NOTES

15 “Abame has been wiped out”: This fictional incident is probably based on a true incident that occurred in 1905. A white man, Dr. Stewart, on a bicycle trip, made a wrong turn and ended up in an Ahiara village where he was supposedly killed and eaten. According to a later investigation, the people of the village thought he was a ghost, and not a man. Soldiers came a month later and killed 19 people from that village and a neighboring village, and confiscated all their guns. No one knows whether the villages were actually destroyed. This was an example of “collective punishment,” which Europeans often used against Africans; rather than trying to identify a guilty person,

they shot a number of people, and destroyed many homes, in retaliation for an offense. Dr. Stewart's death also provided a justification for a later British expedition against native people.

15 Iron horse: bicycle.

16 “Myself” or “My buttocks”: The Ibo (or Igbo) language is a tonal language, like Chinese. Whether you say a syllable on a high or low note, with your voice going down or going up, changes the meaning of the word. The word *ike* can mean strength or buttocks, depending on the pronunciation of the tones. The translator spoke a slightly different dialect of Ibo than the people of Mbanta did, and so used the tones differently, to the great entertainment of the people of Mbanta.

17 “They asked who the king of the village was”: The British often governed by controlling the king or headman of a village. They were confused by the fact that the Ibo did not have kings; that made it more difficult for the British to control them.

17 Ancestor Worship “He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice . . .” The Ibo believed that their ancestors' spirits prowled around, looking after their descendants' welfare. A man would pour out a libation (a drink offering) before drinking his palm wine, and would give a piece of kola nut in the ancestors' names, asking for protection and guidance. The Ibo also offered animal sacrifices in the names of their departed ancestors.

CHAPTERS 15–18 COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. (15) Achebe has spent about 2/3 of the book setting up for us Ibo society before the coming of the white man. White men have been mentioned once in Chapter 8, but only as a kind of myth. How do they suddenly become very real to Okonkwo and his friends?
2. (15) What did the Oracle of Abame warn about the white men?
3. (16) Re-read Chapter 16. What did the missionary and his interpreter say that the Ibo people found offensive or ridiculous? What did some of the Ibo find attractive? Why?
4. (17) Why is Okonkwo so frightened about Nwoye's becoming a Christian?
5. (18) When one of the Christians, Okoli, supposedly kills the sacred python, what does the village do? Why? What happens to Okoli?
6. What kind of people are attracted to the missionaries so far? Why do you think these people are interested in the “new” religion?

CHAPTERS 19–21 NOTES

21 Mr. Brown: It appears that the good missionary Mr. Brown is based on a well-respected missionary named G. T. Basden, who diligently investigated the customs and religion of the Ibo among whom he ministered.

21 “Breaking up and falling apart”: According to *Clash of Worlds*, traditional worldviews, such as the Ibo worldview, work best in societies that are not in contact

Unit 1—Lesson 1: Chinua Achebe and African Literature

with other cultures. Contact with foreign cultures can cause people to question their traditions and their elders. Their world “falls apart,” and they may adopt one of the major world religions, abandoning the traditional beliefs that were only relevant to their society when it was isolated and they thought their society was “the center of the world.”

CHAPTERS 19–21 COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. (19) How is the importance of family unity stressed in Chapter 19?
2. What five institutions has the white man brought to Umuofia?
3. (20) What criticisms are made against the British government?
4. (21) What positive things is the missionary Mr. Brown doing in the community?
5. (21) Summarize Ibo beliefs about Chukwu and the lesser gods.
6. (21) In what ways so far is the clan “breaking up and falling apart”?

CHAPTERS 22–25 NOTES

23 District Commissioner sending “his sweet-tongued messenger”: Sadly, this fictional meeting was based on actual practice at the time. “. . . as early as 1900 a Major Gallaway wrote to Sir Ralph Moor . . . ‘The practice of calling chiefs to meetings and then seizing them and of calling in guns to mark and then destroying them has resulted in a general distrust of the government and its policy’” (*Achebe’s World*).

CHAPTERS 22–25 COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. (22) How do Reverend Smith and Enoch bring about a crisis between the Christians and the rest of the village?
2. (22) How does the village react to what they see as desecration?
3. (23) What injustices do the District Commissioner and the court messengers (*kotma*) commit?
4. (24) At this point, at the beginning of Chapter 24, what do you think and feel about “the great queen,” “peace and good government” that the District Commissioner talks about? What do you think Okonkwo and the other elders think of them?
5. (24) In Chapter 24 Umuofia meets, as in Chapter 2. How is this meeting similar to, and how is it different from, that earlier meeting?
6. (25) What does Okonkwo do at the end of Chapter 24, and what does he do afterwards? Why?
7. (25) Ironically, Okonkwo, who spent his life afraid of being shamed like his father, has now defiled the land by his death and will have a shameful burial, as his father did. Who does Obierika blame? Why?
8. In Chapter 13 Okonkwo accidentally “defiles” his community by killing someone from his clan. How is Okonkwo’s defilement of his community in Chapter 25 different from the earlier one? Do you think Achebe is really saying that the white men have defiled Umuofia? Why or why not?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Achebe, while trying to show us the positive aspects of Ibo culture, also shows us negative aspects. He said, “The question is how does a writer re-create the past? Quite clearly there is a strong temptation to idealize it—to extol its good points and pretend that the bad never existed. This is where the writer’s integrity comes in. . . . The credibility of the world he is attempting to re-create will be called into question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts. We cannot pretend that our past was one long, technicolor idyll. We have to admit that like other people’s pasts ours had its good as well as its bad side” (*Nigeria Magazine*, quoted in Ogbaa, p. 2). Do you think Achebe has succeeded in giving a balanced picture of Ibo culture? What, in your opinion were some positive and negative characteristics of Ibo culture, as Achebe shows it, before the white man’s arrival? Consider government, marriage and family, cultural values, hospitality, entertainment, war, religious beliefs and practices, music, food and clothing. Are some of these features ungodly, and some godly? Are some of these areas neutral?
2. What impression does the book give you of the British colonial government? How was it harmful to the Ibo people? Do you think colonialism did anything good for the Ibo people? If so, what?
3. Some people have said that Okonkwo is like a tragic hero of Western literature. He begins in prosperity, ends in tragedy, and is brought down by a tragic flaw and by “fate.” Do you agree? If so, what do you think his tragic flaw was? Was there any point in the novel where he could have acted differently and not ended up as he did, or do you think his ending was foreordained?
4. What did people in this novel value most? What were they trying to attain or achieve? How did their values affect their actions? How were their values similar to and different from your own values, or the values of the culture in which you live?

LITERARY LESSON: HISTORICAL FICTION

A historical novel is a story that brings to life some time period and place of the past. It may focus on or include real people and events, or it may place only fictional characters in that period. It attempts to re-create the culture, society, and everyday life of the time in a way that enables the reader to experience that period. What impact did historical events have on ordinary people living then? How did those people think, feel, and act? How did they speak, where did they live, what did they eat, how did they treat each other? How were they different from us, and how were they like us? A historical novelist attempts to answer these questions.

A good historical novelist generally does in-depth research, using primary sources (that is, writings or stories of people who lived at that time, rather than secondary sources which are written about that time). The novelist tries to write a story that is interesting in itself, but is also realistic for the time period, with fully-developed characters who think and act as people of that era might have. They should still be characters we can identify with in some ways, and we may gain insights from the story that are applicable to any time and place.

How does historical fiction differ from history or biography? In a history or biography, all the characters are real people, and all the events really happened (though the author gives his or her own perspective on those people and events). In historical fiction, the author may use real people and events, or he may change those people and events in some way. Usually he adds people and events that are fictional, but which could have existed in that time and place. Achebe uses some real events and characters which he modified, perhaps to suit his plot better, or perhaps because we don't know all the details about those real characters and events. (Some of those events and characters are noted in this guide, such as the missionary G. T. Basden who appears to have been a model for Mr. Brown, and the incident of Dr. Stewart's death, which seems to have been the model for the massacre at Abame in *Things Fall Apart*.) Sometimes Achebe has combined several events or people into one character. The D.C. and his actions are probably based on a number of British D.C.'s and their actions. In this way Achebe could include specific actions directed toward his fictional characters, but still be faithful to the historical record.

A writer of historical fiction may use all fictional characters, as Achebe does, or may use fictional characters for the main character or supporting characters, interacting with some real characters. This can make the story more interesting or entertaining. For instance, in Robert Lawson's work of children's historical fiction, *Ben and Me*, the author invents a mouse named Amos who is supposedly Benjamin Franklin's friend and adviser. Franklin's inventions and experiments are historical; the mouse and his contributions are not. This addition of a mouse as a main character makes the story attractive and fun for children. Other authors may use children as the main fictional characters, interacting with adult real characters. The theory is that children prefer to read about someone close to their own age, therefore they will be more involved in a story about children. Do you agree? Do you prefer to read about people around your own age, or about people substantially older or younger than you are? In children's historical fiction, authors generally leave out material they consider inappropriate for children; perhaps gory war scenes, or a historical person's not-so-heroic character traits and

actions. They may want to focus on the good aspects of the person and events, to give children models to live by.

Sometimes authors create characters because they want to talk about ordinary, everyday people of a time period rather than about the people who were famous, whose lives we know more about. They may have an idea for a type of character whose characteristics were either encouraged or discouraged in that time period and want to develop that character by putting him or her in various situations that might have occurred. This is what authors do with any kind of fiction; historical fiction gives them a specific time and place in which to do it.

An author might want to write about a specific theme, or give a different perspective on historical events, so he or she invents characters and events that express that idea and perspective. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe is trying to show us history through the eyes of Ibo leaders, rather than giving the perspective of white leaders and visitors which had been shown in British history books and novels. The character of Okonkwo, with his extreme energy and courage, helps us see how the changes of colonialism affected people who were very tied to Ibo traditions and values.

Usually all the dialogue in historical fiction is the author's creation, though occasionally an author may include a famous speech or saying of a historical person. Should characters speak in exactly the same style as people used in that time period? Obviously Okonkwo and his friends would have spoken in Ibo, which we do not understand. However, Achebe has tried to give us the flavor of the Ibo language by his sentence structure and use of proverbs and images. You probably would not want to have characters in a medieval novel speaking in Middle English, which your readers would not understand. However, you could use sentence structure and expressions that would give their speech a medieval flavor. You would avoid modern slang and expressions which would sound out of place. To find out how people spoke in a certain time period, consult references or read a primary source. For instance, in writing a medieval story, you could read Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and look for words and expressions for your characters to use.* E. L. Konigsburg, in her novel *A Proud Taste for Scarlet and Miniver*, about Eleanor of Aquitaine, includes words like *bailey*, *frail*, *bedchamber*, *master-at-arms*, *vassal*, and *homage*. These are not difficult words, but words seldom used today. While she writes with an informal style, she does not use contractions, such as "don't," which would sound out of place in the medieval language of kings and queens.

The same is true if you write a story set in another culture or country; include appropriate words and expressions. In the books you will be reading this semester, you will find that the translators and authors have often included some foreign words, perhaps because they are difficult to translate (since any given language has specific words for things other languages do not have words for, such as *chi* and *egwugwu* in Ibo), or perhaps because, repeated, they give the flavor of the language, such as the use of the word "Allah" for God in the book *Fountain and Tomb*.

*Use those expressions sparingly or your readers will not understand the story.

Achebe has written a historical novel set in a time when Western influences were just beginning to affect the Ibo people. Much of the book takes place before the arrival of the English. Achebe takes the time to draw in detail a picture of a complex, rich, but flawed society (as all societies in the world are flawed, in different ways). On a surface level, he shows the clothing, food, and daily occupations of the people of Umuofia. He shows a democratic government, where decisions are made by consensus, based on reason and tradition. On a deeper level, Achebe presents a society held tightly together by ties of kinship, respect for elders (including those who have died), and mutual responsibility. This society has a system of “titles” that encourages hard work and generosity. Their religious beliefs seek to understand and propitiate a world of unpredictable spirits. Achebe presents the complexity of a society in which there are creative people like Unoka who value art and music and who make people laugh, as well as strong, tough warriors like Okonkwo. He also shows the difficulties of women in this culture, who may share their husbands with other wives, who may be beaten for the slightest excuse, and who are sold for a bride-price; yet he also shows loving husbands and fathers. He mentions the suffering of a woman who kept giving birth to twins, who were “thrown away” in the forest because of the teachings of her traditional religion; she turns to Christianity for hope. Achebe says in the video interview *Chinua Achebe: Africa’s Voice* that he is presenting a portrait of a culture, not a criticism of it. He believes that Umuofian society suffered partly because of the way they treated their women.

We should evaluate historical fiction as we would evaluate any piece of literature: according to how well-written it is, whether it has an interesting plot based on a valid conflict, whether the characters are realistic and three-dimensional, etc. In addition, we need to consider how historically accurate it is; Has the author faithfully re-created the world as it was in that time and place? Are the characters actually motivated by values common to people at that time? Poorer historical fiction may have characters who seem to be modern Americans in their thinking and goals and culture, transported into foreign-looking places and given foreign costumes. When you read historical fiction, evaluate how much the characters seem to be motivated by the cultural values people had in that place at that time. Of course the characters should be individuals as well, with their own strengths and weaknesses. Achebe has done a masterful job of re-creating a society that is historically accurate and whose members share Ibo traditional values, yet are unique individuals. Since many aspects of that Ibo society still exist today, Achebe had the advantage of experiencing some of what he described!

When you are writing your own historical fiction, you will want to do research from general sources such as history books as well as material which was written during that time. Be careful that you do not include anachronisms, things that are in the wrong time, such as inventions or styles from a later period than the time you are writing about. For instance, a quick check in the encyclopedia, under “tomato,” tells me that tomatoes were brought to Europe from Latin America in the mid-1500s, and were not widely accepted as a food in Europe until the 1800s. So I wouldn’t have the hero of my story set in Italy in the 1400s eating spaghetti with tomato sauce! If you are writing about another part of the world and you know someone from that area, ask them your questions, and if possible have them read your story and tell you anything they see as out of place. You can do the same if you are writing a story

set in the recent past, such as the time of your grandparents; they can check the story for you and tell you what doesn't fit. Try to make your fictional world as similar as you can to the real world of that time, place, and people group.

CULTURAL LESSON: CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS IN LITERATURE

Achebe, in re-creating pre-colonial Ibo society for us, presents complex and orderly ways that Ibo people relate to one another. Many of these characteristics are found in cultures around the world today, but some are very different from the emphases of Western culture. Let's look at one of the interactions in the book more carefully.

In Chapter 1, Okoye goes to Unoka to ask him to repay a debt. Unoka is at home playing his flute. He immediately gets up and shakes hands with Okoye, who rolls out his goatskin and sits down. Unoka goes in and gets a kola nut, some alligator pepper, and chalk. They pass the kola back and forth for a while, arguing over who is going to honor the other by having him break open the kola. Okoye draws his personal symbols with the chalk, which signifies coolness and peace. Unoka finally breaks open the kola nut, praying to their ancestors for life and health and protection against enemies. They eat and talk about "many things," including the weather, the next feast, politics (an impending war), and music. Okoye then thanks Unoka for the kola nut, mentions that he intends to take a title, and speaks in proverbs for some time. He never directly states his business, but Unoka finally figures out that his friend wants him to return some money Unoka had borrowed from him (in the form of cowry shells). Unoka laughs and answers him by showing him a wall with all his debts painted on it. He says, "I shall pay you, but not today. Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them. I shall pay my big debts first." He takes a pinch of snuff, and Okoye rolls up his goatskin and leaves.

How would this conversation have gone in your culture? Among Americans, it might have gone something like this: Bob owes Joe money. Joe calls Bob to make sure he'll be home at a certain time, then arrives at that time. Joe may invite him in or stand with him at the door. Joe says, "Hey, Bob, how are you doing?" Bob says, "Fine, Joe, and you?" Joe says, "Can't complain." Bob says, "What can I do for you?" Joe says, "Well, you know, I'm in a financial crunch right now. I was wondering if you could return that money you borrowed from me a while back." Bob says, "Sorry, Joe. I haven't got the money right now. Maybe next week." Joe says, "Okay. Let me know when you've got it because I need it as soon as possible. See you later." Bob says, "Okay, bye!"

What do these two conversations show you about two very different cultures?

Okonkwo's culture is *relationship-oriented* rather than *task-oriented*. Westerners generally want to "get the job done"; we can do business with someone without even knowing their name or anything about them. In Umuofia, as in many cultures, the person is more important

than the task. You must talk for awhile, find out how the person is really doing, and ask about their family, before you can do any kind of business with them. In Chapter 8, when Ofoedu joins Okonkwo and Obierika, “It was clear from his twinkling eyes that he had important news. But it would be impolite to rush him. Obierika offered him a lobe of the kola nut he had broken with Okonkwo. Ofoedu ate slowly and talked about the locusts.” After some time, he finally gets around to sharing his news about the deaths of a husband and his wife. Renewing the relationship, with hospitality, had to happen before he could share the news. Again, in Chapter 8, when a suitor and his family come to negotiate a marriage, the men greet each other and drink together first. “As the men drank, they talked about everything except the thing for which they had gathered.”

Okonkwo’s culture uses *indirect communication* more than *direct communication*. “Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. . . . Okoye was a great talker and he spoke for a long time, skirting round the subject and then hitting it finally.” The focus of indirect communication is on being friendly and not offending or embarrassing the other person. People use proverbs and stories to communicate their message in a non-threatening way. The message itself may be offensive. When someone contradicts Okonkwo in a meeting at the beginning of Chapter 4, he says, “This meeting is for men,” rather than directly addressing the man and saying, “Your opinion is worthless because you have no titles.” He is rebuked by an older man with a proverb, “Those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble.” The older man could have said, “Okonkwo, you’re out of line. You’re getting too big for your britches.” But he rebukes him indirectly with a proverb. Okonkwo understands him perfectly and immediately apologizes, without taking offense at the older man. In negotiating a dowry in Chapter 8, rather than directly discussing money amounts, the men pass a bundle of broomsticks back and forth, until they agree on a bundle of the right size. They make fun of another clan, where people “haggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or a cow in the market.”

Okonkwo’s culture tends toward *spontaneous hospitality* rather than *structured hospitality*. Okoye shows up to see Unoka with no warning, and Unoka immediately stops what he is doing and greets him. In modern Western societies, we generally tend to “invite people over,” make appointments, call before coming, and the host or hostess will prepare food and drink and possibly entertainment for a specific time. In many other cultures, people stop by and visit whenever they are free, and the host or hostess is expected to drop any other plans or activities and give their attention to the guest until the guest chooses to leave. This also shows an *event-orientation* rather than a *time-orientation*. People enjoy what is in front of them, responding to whatever happens, rather than keeping to a schedule and trying to arrive places “on time” and leave “on time.” In many places, people often come to a meeting, even a church service, an hour or more after it has started. However, since the focus is on the event, not the time, they feel they have participated as much as those who came “on time.”

Okonkwo’s culture tends to be *formal* rather than *informal*. There are strict rules and ceremonies for various occasions. If a guest comes, a person brings out kola and they

ceremonially argue over who breaks it. A prayer is made when breaking the kola. The chalk is used to make certain symbols on the floor and on the person, prescribed by the person's rank in society. In Chapter 3 when Okonkwo approaches a wealthy man to sharecrop for him, he brings certain gifts. Okonkwo, who brought the wine, must drink it first (to prove that it is not poisoned). The men drink, then the wives come in and drink, kneeling, in order of seniority. Everything is done in orderly, established ways. Again, after all the ritual and chatting, Okonkwo finally broaches the purpose of his visit, and it is discussed indirectly with much use of proverbs on both sides. In formal cultures, it is also important to show respect to older people or people with higher positions in society. In Okonkwo's society, the *egwugwu*, who represent the ancestors, are greeted with a hand touching the ground in submission. In Chapter 22, when a Christian unmask an *egwugwu*, it is a terrible offense because "One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an *egwugwu* in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated." Disrespect for the ancestors is not tolerated.

Okonkwo's culture is based on the *community* more than on *individualism*. A person's identity is tied to the group, who protect and provide for him. His behavior reflects on the whole group. The importance of unity is emphasized by the cry, "Umuofia kwenu!" "United Umuofia!" at the beginning of meetings where the clan meets to make important decisions. When the clan decides Okonkwo has to leave because of his accident, he submits to their decision without question. Disagreeing or arguing against that decision would be an act of betrayal. His mother's clan takes him in; he continues to have an identity as part of his mother's community. But he is frustrated that he has lost his place in his father's community; he feels that by losing his status there he has lost everything. In a group-oriented culture, people are not encouraged to take initiative and make their own decisions. However, Okonkwo does assert his individuality in seeking to become a leader in his home community. And there is an individualistic aspect to Ibo society in that each person has his own *chi*, his own personal god-force, and each person in an assembly is listened to. Some are respected more than others, of course, because of their achievements, signified by their titles. One reason Okonkwo commits suicide is that his community, which gave him his identity, his goals, and his dreams, has fallen apart, and he can no longer live in this disconnected world.

Okonkwo's culture values *inclusion* rather than *privacy*. Everyone is included in common activities, and people don't like to be left alone. In Chapter 12 we see a good example of the community working together as a group. All the women and children gather to help the bride's mother in "her difficult but happy task of cooking for a whole village." They each bring contributions of food and pots of water. When someone's cow escapes, all the women go after it, except those delegated to watch the cooking pot. They make sure that everyone has come to help catch the cow, except those with a valid excuse. The village witnesses the blessings exchanged by the bride's and groom's families, then all celebrate together by feasting and dancing. In an inclusion culture, anyone nearby is included in a conversation, and everyone is included in any plans that are made. Possessions are often shared. In Okonkwo's society people do have private possessions, although generosity is highly valued and honored in his society.

Achebe has given us a detailed picture of a people group at a certain time in history. We see their culture, their way of life, their clothing and food and ways of making a living. And we see the historical event that changed much of that—the coming of the British and of Christianity. Some changes were for the better: The Christian gospel could free people from many of their fears. It prevented some unnecessary deaths. Other changes brought by imperialism were for the worse. As in any good historical novel, we see the effects that this historical event, British colonial rule in Nigeria, had on individual people, such as Okonkwo and his son Nwoye, as well as on their society as a whole.

NOTE: I highly recommend the book *Foreign to Familiar*, by Sarah A. Lanier, if you want to further explore the differences between cultures. These ideas are also summarized in Appendix E, for your reference in this course.

WRITING EXERCISES

1. Write a short story, no more than five pages long, set in the past. If you have recently studied a certain time period in history, or the history of another country, you may use that as your setting. Or research a time period that interests you. Try to develop interesting characters and an interesting plot appropriate for the time period. Include historical details. Some possibilities are
 - a. Japan during the time of the samurais
 - b. China during the Cultural Revolution
 - c. Algeria during its struggle for independence
 - d. Egypt under the Pharaohs
 - e. Israel under King Solomon
 - f. Rome under Julius Caesar
 - g. India under the Mogul emperors
 - h. the fall of Constantinople
2. Pretend that you live in a certain historical time and place. Write a journal of one or several days of your life. Research your era so that you will include accurate details. Include your feelings about “current” events, and speech/word usage. Try to talk the way a person from that time would have talked. You might pretend to be an Ibo person during the time of this book, or you can choose a different time and place.
3. In a 1- to 2-page essay compare and contrast two characters. They may both be from the novel, or you may compare yourself to a character in the novel with which you can identify in some way: in character, in personality, in situation, in struggles, in hopes and dreams. Perhaps you lose your temper easily, as Okonkwo does. Perhaps you have different ideas than your father, as Nwoye does. Perhaps there is someone you love deeply and are afraid to lose, as Ekwefi loves Ezinma. How are you alike? How are you different? You may include ways in which that person’s cultural background makes him or her different from you.

Unit 1—Lesson 1: Chinua Achebe and African Literature

4. Analyze one characteristic of Okonkwo's culture, giving at least three specific examples and quotes from the novel, in 1 to 2 pages. Choose from characteristics listed in Appendix E. Show how that cultural emphasis is seen in the novel. If you wish, you may compare and contrast that cultural characteristic with your own culture's characteristics.
5. Choose some aspect of Ibo culture and compare and contrast it with your home culture. Use specific examples from *Things Fall Apart* and from your own culture. Include at least two ways they are the same (comparison) and at least two ways they are different (contrast).

Possible topics:

- a. Marriage, or Roles of Men and Women, or Parents and Children
 - b. Leadership
 - c. Justice or Crime
 - d. Government
 - e. War
 - f. Religion (Beliefs and/or Practices) (You could compare Ibo traditional religion with Christianity, atheism, or another religion)
 - g. Family Life
 - h. Environment: terrain, weather, plants and animals
 - i. Language (may include tones, sounds, use of proverbs; you may do some research on this if you wish)
 - j. Music (e.g., instruments used, when music is used, how it sounds)
 - k. Education (Methods: How are the young taught what they need to know? Curriculum/Subjects: What is it they need to know?)
 - l. Agriculture or Occupations (Ways of Making a Living)
 - m. Values
 - n. Dreams/Ideals
 - o. Weddings
 - p. Funerals
 - q. Yearly Calendar/Holidays
 - r. Homes
 - s. Community Life
6. Write a 1- to 2-page paper explaining how to do something in Ibo society. Write from an Ibo point of view. Tell how to do these things in their society, not in yours. Include at least three steps in your process, and explain them clearly and in logical order. Use as much evidence from the book as you can find. You are free to add a bit of humor, if you can. You may consider writing about how to:

- a. find a bride
 - b. arrange a marriage
 - c. grow yams
 - d. be a good wife
 - e. gain honor in the village
 - f. lose honor in the village
 - g. take a title
 - h. lose your place in the village
 - i. raise children
 - j. treat your wives
 - k. celebrate a funeral
 - l. “keep” an *ogbanje* child
 - m. solve disputes within the village
 - n. solve disputes with other villages
 - o. have (or win) a wrestling match
 - p. please (or how to displease) the “gods”
 - q. treat an “*egwugwu*”
 - r. cleanse the village from a “defilement”
7. Write a paper persuading someone in the book of something. Include at least three arguments to convince them of that point of view. Feel free to use proverbs, stories, and/or humor in your persuasion. You may choose from these:
- a. Pretend you are Mr. Kiaga or one of the other missionaries, and persuade Okonkwo (or another character) to become a Christian. Be sure to use arguments that will relate to him—talk about defilement, or his fears, or his need to prove himself. Remember that his idea of God is very different from yours. You might use a story as part of your persuasion.
 - b. Pretend you are Okonkwo and persuade Nwoye, or another character, to leave Christianity. What arguments would Okonkwo use? What is important to him, and what does he think about the Christians? (Remember, we need to understand the other person’s point of view before we can persuade him; so try to understand what Christianity looked like from Okonkwo’s point of view!) You may use proverbs or stories.
 - c. Write from the point of view of an Englishman, to convince Okonkwo that he should accept English rule. You might include the benefits he thinks Okonkwo will get, the things he thinks are

Unit 1—Lesson 1: Chinua Achebe and African Literature

- wrong with Okonkwo's society, or the simple argument of power and fear (We are stronger, therefore you should give in. Otherwise you die.).
- d. Write from Okonkwo's point of view to convince the English that they should go home and leave the Ibo alone. He might talk about the strengths of his society, and the things he doesn't like about the English. He might use proverbs or stories mentioned in the book.
 - e. Write to Okonkwo, convincing him to be kinder to his wives and children. Give him reasons he could relate to: Will they take better care of him if he's nicer to them? Would his children be more likely to grow up the way he wants them to?
 - f. Choose any other character and write to him or her, persuading him of something.
8. Many cultures use mythology and stories to pass along the wisdom of their ancestors. There are several myths or folktales in the novel, including the story of Earth and Sky and Vulture (Chap. 7), the story of Ear and Mosquito (Chap. 9), the story of the snake-lizard and his mother (Chap. 9), the story of the birds and Tortoise (Chap. 11), and the story of Mother Kite (Chap. 15). Using one of these as a pattern, write your own myth or folktale, 1 to 2 pages long. It might be a *pour quoi* (why?) tale, explaining something in nature, as the story of the Birds and Tortoise explains why the tortoise has a patchwork shell, and the story of Ear and Mosquito explains why mosquitoes buzz in people's ears. A story with a clear moral or lesson, as the story of Mother Kite teaches us to be wary of people we don't understand.