



Things Fall Apart

by Chinua Achebe

Teaching Notes prepared by
Glenys Kerley

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Page numbers in these notes refer to Achebe, C. *Things Fall Apart*, PF Heinemann, 1987

Section 1.

An introduction to *Things Fall Apart*

This is the first novel by Chinua Achebe, written in 1958. At this time he still lived in Nigeria, the country of his birth. It is set in the latter part of the reign of Queen Victoria, 1838 - 1901, when the British Empire and the Anglican Church were making inroads into 'darkest' Africa. The author was born in 1930, and so was no further removed from these events than present day students are from the Second World War. It is likely that he drew on oral accounts of the customs and events of the times.

After the Second World War Nigeria began to move towards independence, which was officially delivered to it in 1960. As a young man with a university education, Chinua Achebe had a desire to represent the history of his country in a new, Nigerian, light. He did not feel that European accounts of the colonisation of his country painted an accurate picture.

On the final page of his novel we read that the fictional District Commissioner of Umuofia is planning to write a book called *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, is to have a chapter of this volume devoted to his story. This is then reduced to a paragraph. The irony is, that to reach this information about the scant importance assigned to Okonkwo by the colonial governor, the reader has just read a whole novel devoted to his life and death, written by a member of his own people. A further irony is that having entered into at least a partial understanding of the cultural practices of the people described in the novel, the reader is most unlikely to agree to the term 'Primitive Tribes' as an apt description of them.

The novel is in three sections. The first part is by far the longest and it is from its narrative that the reader gains an understanding of the ordered society in which Okonkwo lives. We hear of elaborate laws of hospitality, and ceremonies to mark the great events of life such as marriage and death. We hear how disputes are settled at law, and gain an insight into the place of religion in this society. We also hear of men taking 'titles', an aspect of this organized society that is not fully revealed to us.

The second section deals with Okonkwo's exile in his motherland. The wisdom of Okonkwo's uncle reveals the value placed on motherhood by this society. It is here that Okonkwo first comes in contact with the missionaries, and forms a low opinion of them.

The final section demonstrates the disintegration of the existing civilization, and the destruction of the man who has been the means of allowing the reader an insight into it. It is in this section that Obierika, the wise and honourable friend of Okonkwo, says of the white man, "He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." (P.127.) Similarly, (p.131), we read that Okonkwo 'mourned for the clan which he saw breaking up and falling apart.'

The Western influence on Achebe's literary education leads to the title, a quotation from a poem by W B Yeats. The same influence is apparent in the presentation of Okonkwo's story as a classic tragedy. Achebe's knowledge of Christianity is also evident in his writing. His ability to span two cultures, the contemporary Nigerian culture and its Western equivalent, places Achebe in an ideal position to interpret one culture to the other.

Section 2. Ways into the text

1. Centring and Marginalisation

Obtain a copy of *From Picture Book to Literary Theory* edited by John Stephens and Ken Watson, St Clair Press. Find the section on the picture book *Do Not Go Around the Edges* - by Daisy Uttemorah, published by Magabala Books, ISBN 0 9588101 17. Obtain at least one copy of this book and work through the students' activities with the class. This will give rise to many interesting discussions about how an imperial power perceives and alters the customs of a colonised people, and the role of religion in this process. The teachers' notes give information about post-colonial literature.

2. Christian Missionaries - a brainstorming and discussion session

- What does the class know about Christian missionaries?
- What basic messages are missionaries supposed to deliver to people who are not Christians?
- Is it possible to induce a group of people to change their religion without also changing their cultural practices? Why/why not?
- What do you know, or imagine, about how the arrival of Christian missionaries in the 19th century would change the way of life of people who had never before seen white people?

3. Missionaries in other texts

- If a class set of *To Kill a Mocking Bird* is available, study chapter 24. How would you describe Mrs Grace Merriweather's attitude to the Mrunas and to J. Grimes Everett?
- If a class set of *Jane Eyre* is available explore the beginning of chapter 31, the end of chapter 32 and the last pages of the book to piece together the fictional St John Rivers' reasons for, and attitudes towards, being a Christian missionary.
- Read or watch the second half of the second part of *Women of the Sun - Maydina*. What evil effects did the well - intentioned missionaries produce in this work of well-researched fiction?

4. A Missionary Hymn

*Far, far away in heathen darkness dwelling
Thousands of souls, for ever may be lost.
Who, who will go, salvation's story telling,
Looking to Jesus, counting not the cost?*

*"All power is given onto me.
Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel,
And lo, I am with you always!"*

*See o'er the world wide open doors inviting:
Soldiers of Christ, arise and enter in!*

*Christians awake! Your forces all uniting,
Send forth the gospel, break the chains of sin!*

"Why will ye die?" the voice of God is calling;

"Why will ye die?" re-echo in his name:

*Jesus hath died to save from death appalling;
Life and salvation therefore go proclaim.*

*God speed the day when those of every nation,
"Glory to God" triumphantly shall sing;
Ransomed, redeemed, rejoicing in salvation,
Shout "Hallelujah, for the Lord is King!"*

From Sankey's Sacred Songs and Solos

- Discuss the audience for, and the purpose of, this hymn.
- Are there still Christian missionaries? If so, what do you know about them? If not, why is this so?
- In the first verse the term 'heathen darkness' is used. Do you think this description of the lives of isolated groups of people is accurate? If so, in what way are they living in darkness. If not, where do you think the misunderstanding came from?
- Do you think there are still 'wide open doors inviting' Christian missionaries in? Why/not?
- In what sense do you think there were 'wide open doors inviting' them in, in the nineteenth century?
- What does the military imagery in the second verse convey to you?
- What significance does the phrase 'chains of sin' have for you? Would the missionaries' clientele have any experience of chains?

5. Visual Text

- If you have access to the Heinemann African Writers Series edition of the book, photocopy Uche Okeke's four line drawings, enlarging them if you choose. Cut them into quarters and have groups of four students decide on four colours that they will apply to the picture, and discuss how they will use them. After they have coloured a quarter each, reassemble the picture. Compare the results of different groups of four. (Each group chooses its own four colours and the use of them.)
- Write an interpretation of the picture chosen.

6. Films to View

Obtainable from www.cinemedia.com.au

- *Africa Awakens*
- *Africa is My Home*
- *Daybreak in Udi*
- *Festac 77*

Section 3. Running sheet

Part One

Chapter One

We are introduced to the famous Okonkwo, son of an unsuccessful father, Unoka. The setting is the nine villages of Umuofia. Okonkwo rose to fame as a wrestler. Twenty years later he had three wives, and eleven children. He was a successful farmer, an admired warrior who had fought in two inter tribal wars, and had taken two titles. All this made him one of the greatest men of his time. His father, Unoka, had taken no title at all, and had died in debt. However, in this society a man was judged according to his own worth, not according to the worth of his father. Okonkwo was ashamed of his father.

Chapter Two

One of the women from the village has been killed in Mbaino. Okonkwo is sent to Mbaino with the ultimatum that that village must either choose war, or offer a young man and a virgin as compensation. The latter course is followed and the young man Ikemefuna comes to live in Okonkwo's household.

Chapter Three

We learn that Unoka was a lazy farmer, and that he had died of an illness that was considered an abomination to the earth goddess. Therefore, he had been taken to the Evil Forest and left there to die, and his body had never been buried. Okonkwo worked very hard to establish his own success because he was afraid of his father's contemptible life and shameful death. He had a fear of weakness and of failure. Success did not come easily or quickly but Okonkwo achieved it by hard work over many years.

Chapter Four

Ikemefuna makes friends with Nwoye, Okonkwo's eldest son, and settles into his new life. We learn about how Okonkwo interacts with the members of his family.

Chapter Five

At the Feast of the New Yam we learn more of family life with Okonkwo.

Chapter Six

An account of the wrestling at the Feast of the New Yam.

Chapter Seven

Ikemefuna is eventually to be put to death. Okonkwo is warned that he should have no hand in it, but, because he is afraid of being weak, he cuts Ikemefuna down even as the young man turns to him for help, calling him father.

Chapter Eight

After spending two days drinking and being unable to sleep, Okonkwo takes himself in hand and goes to visit his friend. We learn more about the customs of the ordered society in which these men live. His friend warns him, "What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the Goddess wipes out whole families." White men are mentioned for the first time.

Chapter Nine

After a peaceful night's sleep, Okonkwo is woken with the news that his favourite child, Ezinma, is dying. We learn about ogbanje children. After receiving treatment with medicinal herbs administered by Okwonko, Ezinma recovers.

Chapter Ten

We learn about the justice system operating in this society. Okonkwe plays an active role in it.

Chapter Eleven

The priestess Chielo takes Ezinma from her home after dark because the God Agbala wants to see her in the caves which are his shrine. Her parents are both uneasy but they let the priestess take her. Her mother secretly follows as the priestess carries her daughter on her back. They tour the nine villages before going to the cave. Her mother waits for Ezinma, and Okonkwe also is watching over his daughter. We learn of the marriage of Okonkwe and his second wife, Ekwefi, the mother of Ezinma.

Chapter Twelve

We learn more about marriage customs in this society.

Chapter Thirteen

We learn about funeral rites, as the old man who warned Okonkwe to have no hand in Ikemefuna's death dies, and is buried in honour. Guns are fired as part of the ceremony. Okonkwe's gun explodes and kills one of the dead man's sons. Okonkwe and his wives and children must now go into exile for seven years to Mbanta, the land from which Okonkwe's mother came.

Part Two

Chapter Fourteen

Okonkwo and his three wives and eleven children arrive in his Mother Land. They are welcomed and provided for by his uncle and cousins. His uncle, Uchendu, warns him against despair.

Chapter Fifteen

Ikonkwo receives a visit from his friend, Obierika, who brings news of what has happened in Abame. A white man arrived on an iron horse. The oracle said that he would break up their clan. He was killed and his 'horse' was tied up. Other white men came and wiped out the village.

Chapter Sixteen

Two years later Obierika visits Okonkwo a second time because the missionaries have come to Umuofia and Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, is with them. He denies that Okonkwo is his father. Nwoye's mother explains to Obierika that the missionaries have been to Mbanta too, and that Nwoye has been attracted to the new religion.

Chapter Seventeen

When the missionaries asked for land in Mbanta they are given part of the Evil Forest. They successfully establish themselves there.

Chapter Eighteen

There is conflict between the church and the villagers of Mbanta.

Chapter Nineteen

Okonkwo has served his seven years' exile and is about to return to Umuofia. He gives a lavish feast for his kinsfolk before leaving. An older member of the family thanks him, and expresses his fear for the young people in these changing times.

Part Three

Chapter Twenty

Okonkwo has great plans for his return to Umuofia, but it too has changed in his absence. It has become the seat of government for the area, and there is a courthouse in which the District Commissioner 'judged cases in ignorance.' Because he does not speak the language, he is dependent on what his employees tell him, and they can be corrupted.

Chapter Twenty One

Mr Brown, the missionary in Umuofia, establishes a school which teaches English, reading and writing, and so qualifies its students to work for the white men. There is also a trading store which brings new wealth into the area. Okonkwo's return does not cause the stir that he had hoped for.

Chapter Twenty Two

Mr Brown is replaced by Rev James Smith. Mr Smith encourages the more fanatical elements of the church, and one of them pulls the mask off an egwugwu, a respected member of the village who is masked and costumed to represent a god. Without any bloodshed, the church is destroyed in repayment for this.

Chapter Twenty Three

Okonkwo is pleased that the people have taken action against the Christians at last. He is among the six leaders who are invited to see the District Commissioner to discuss the problem. They observe their customs of courtesy when visiting, but the District Commissioner is tricking them and they are placed under arrest. The court messengers have been ordered to treat them with respect, but they deliberately do not do so. The court messengers also increase the fine imposed by the District Commissioner by 25% so that they too make a profit from the people of Umuofia.

Chapter Twenty Four

When the fine has been collected the six leaders are released, and there is great unrest. A meeting is arranged the next day at which there is a fiery speech. The District Commissioner sends five court messengers to stop the meeting, and Okonkwo cuts off the head of the first one. Instead of slaughtering the other four, the crowd lets them escape and Okonkwo knows that they will never fight back again.

Chapter Twenty Five

Okonkwo has hanged himself. His friends are bound by custom and cannot cut him down. When the District Commissioner comes to arrest him they lead him to Okonkwo and ask for help to have him cut down and buried. Obierika praises the dead man, but to the district commissioner he only represents a brief mention in his projected book, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

Section 4. A perspective on the text

In this novel, Chinua Achebe creates a view of a prosperous, well ordered society, living in relative peace and harmony with its neighbours, in which men like Okonkwo, who are 'not afraid of blood', can be happy. Okonkwo's father, Unoka, was a lazy farmer and a coward, and loved peace and music. The young Nwoye grieved for his dead friend, Ikemefuna, and questioned the morality of abandoning twin babies to death from exposure. These men were less certain of happiness in this society. The happiness of women is scarcely considered. This society is classically patriarchal, and while the men seem to ensure that the women are not treated extremely brutally, their happiness is not a priority.

Compare this society with the England of the time, as it is reflected in the works of nineteenth century novelists. Is Okonkwo any more brutal towards his wives and the children in his care, than Mr Murdstone is in *David Copperfield*? Is Ekwefi any more or less free to run from her marriage, to the man to whom she is attracted, than Catherine is free to run to Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*? Is the happiness of the heroine of *Jane Eyre* of any greater consideration to any of the men around her, than the happiness of any of the women and children in Umuofia is to their menfolk? Is exposing twin babies to die in the bush any more cruel than the means of disposing of unwanted children described in Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* or *Oliver Twist*? If the social conditions in England were so similar to those in Umuofia, what then had the Christian missionaries to offer the people of Umuofia?

Committed Christians will argue that the religion itself was a benefit to those who did not already know the 'truth of the gospel.' This is a matter of faith, and therefore there is little point in any of us arguing the point.

The new religion certainly brought changed values, which led to changed social practices. The appeal of Christianity to the meek who are to inherit the earth, the weak who can lay their burdens on Christ and gain relief, and the outcasts who are to regard themselves as equal to anybody else, is a powerful force for social change. The 'great men' in Umuofia, adapted to this change with varying degrees of pragmatism. Akunna discussed religion with the missionary, Mr Brown, and each man understood the other's culture better after these discussions. Obierika disapproved of the changes, but never opposed them unless he was in good company. He was not one of the six leaders of Umuofia invited to visit the District Commissioner for discussions and unjust punishment, and at the end of the novel he lived on to enjoy, or perhaps suffer, the fruits of his old age. Okonkwo, however, had so much faith invested in the old religion, and so much ambition invested in the old ways, that he openly opposed the social changes. He stood up on his own for what he believed, and this led to his shameful suicide. "It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone." (P. 18.) The words of Unoka, Okonkwo's father, echo down the years. However, the bitter and difficult failure that Okonkwo experiences when he tries to resist change, may be preferable to him to living in a state of weak submission to an alien power. Similarly, death at his own hands was preferable to him to public execution at the hands of his enemies.

In partnership with the missionaries came the white administrators, who thought they were also bringing benefits. "We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy," (p.139) asserts the District Commissioner to the six leaders of Umuofia whom he has just deceived and imprisoned. These men are very far from being happy, and they believe, with some justice, that they already had a peaceful administration before the District Commissioner came.

How do the two societies compare in terms of peace keeping and the protection of citizens? In the old administration the clan was protected from outsiders by the threat of war. In the England of the time, people were also protected from outsiders by the threat of war. However, when Okonkwo looks back to 'the noblest war', a war against Isike, (p.143), we discover that slaughtering the enemy amounted to killing twelve of them in a fortnight, while suffering the loss of two of their own men. Okonkwo has killed five men in war in total. Compared to the obscene statistics of European wars, even prior to the First World War, and to Old Testament accounts of battles, this loss of life seems moderate. There is no mention of any African women or children being killed in war. War in Umuofia seems to be exclusively waged amongst men.

In Umuofia, murder within the clan led to exile, and there was a distinction between the punishment for deliberate murder and for accidental killing. Murder outside the clan led to a negotiated settlement or to war. The cost of the killing of the woman of Umuofia in Mbaino, which involved more than one killer, is the killing of Ikemefuna, and the unknown fate of the girl who accompanied him to Umuofia. However this loss of life is not inevitable. There might have been a happier outcome if 'the Oracle of the Hills and Cave' had spoken differently. The punishment for unlawful killing in the England of this time was the public hanging of all those judged to be involved in the killing. There was no flexibility in this. In the circumstances of the murder of the woman in Mbaino, English justice would certainly have led to the loss of more lives, although they would have been different lives - the lives of all the convicted, not the lives of an innocent boy and girl.

When the people of Abame killed the white missionary they were ambushed at the market place and indiscriminate killing took place on a large scale. There is no account of any aggression on the part of the Africans to balance this event. If we are to accept the picture presented by Achebe, war was always declared openly. The Africans were not so ignoble as to deceive their enemies with a surprise attack, or to kill innocent civilians.

Along with the missionaries and administrators came the traders and their goods. "Tell them that I will bring many iron horses when we have settled down among them. Some of them will even ride the iron horse themselves", (p.104), says the missionary in Mbanta. The animated conversation that takes place after this is because the men of Mbanta had not realised that the missionary was going to live among them. The missionary may have thought it had to do with the promise of bicycles. Nevertheless, the Africans are not immune to the lure of the material world. At the beginning of chapter 21 we read, 'The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia.' Umuofia has now become part of the world economy, and Africans are being corrupted into accepting bribes.

Does Achebe convince us that Western civilization had little to recommend it to the people of West Africa in the late nineteenth century? Despite the shortcomings of his hero Okonkwo, and the knowledge that the novel is designed to capture our respect for the old ways, he convinces me. The title of the novel emphasises the inevitability of the collapse of this one civilization in the face of another more populous and more powerful civilization. At the end of it, I, too, 'mourn the loss of the clan', and question the motives and morality of the forces that led to its loss.

Section 5. Character, style and setting

Character

1. Character Names

- The African names can be difficult for some of us to spell and pronounce. Keep a list of character names, and practise saying and writing them.

2. Okonkwo as a Tragic Hero

- Read and discuss the following description of a tragic hero.
A tragic hero is a person of prominence in his society. He achieves great success. He has a fatal flaw that fate works upon to bring about his downfall. There is a convention that strange events occur in nature as fate brings about his downfall. Many other people suffer alongside him. The audience is awed by his fate, feeling great pity for him, and fearing to share a similar fate.
- How does Okonkwo measure up to this description of a tragic hero?
- If you are familiar with one of Shakespeare's tragedies, such as Macbeth, compare the two tragic heroes.

3. Nwoye's Point of View

- Allocate two or three chapters to pairs of students. Students scan these chapters for information about Nwoye. The resulting information is shared by all members of the class.
- Students, in groups, should discuss why Nwoye so quickly converted to Christianity. Groups should share their opinions with the class.
- Having found out as much as possible about Nwoye, students should consider these three verses of a hymn.

*There were ninety and nine that safely lay
In the shelter of the fold,
But one was out on the hills away,
Far off from the gates of gold;
Away on the mountains cold and bare,
Away from the tender Shepherd's care.*

*"Lord Thou hast here Thy ninety and nine;
Are they not enough for Thee?"
But the Shepherd made answer, "This of Mine
Has wander'd away from Me;
And although the road be rough and steep,
I go to the desert to find my sheep."*

*But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed;
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through,
Ere he found His sheep that was lost.
Out in the desert He heard its cry-
Sick and helpless and ready to die. ... Elizabeth Cecilia Clephane 1830 – 1869*

Discuss the language used in the first three verses of this nineteenth century hymn.

- How do you account for the odd capitals used?
- Is it the story of a lord or a shepherd? Who would not be confused on this point?
- What features of the landscape are mentioned? Does this seem logical?
- Who are the ransomed? How would you know?
- If this is the hymn that attracted Nwoye on p105, how do you account for its appeal to him?
- On p.148 the District Commissioner reflects that “one of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words.” Comment on this view in the light of your thoughts about this hymn.

Style

1. Language Features in *Things Fall Apart*

- Which features of an oral story-telling tradition can you detect in the writing of this, Achebe’s first novel?
- Examine the end of each chapter and the beginning of the next. How does Achebe use suspense?
- Examine chapters at random and look for anecdotes about people who are not mentioned again in the text, or who are barely mentioned again.
- Why do you suppose he describes ceremonial meetings and greetings more than once?
- How does he employ humour? Which kinds of humour does he employ?
- What is the effect of the folk tales that he includes?

2. *Proverbs from Things Fall Apart*

‘ Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is very highly regarded, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.’ (P.5.)

“Whenever I see a dead man’s mouth, I see the folly of not eating what one has in one’s lifetime.” (P.4.)

“The sun will shine on those that stand before it shines on those who kneel under them” (P.6.)

“When the moon is shining, the cripple becomes hungry for a walk.” (P.7.)

“A man who pays respect to the great paves his way for his own greatness.” (P.14.)

“A toad does not run in the day-time for nothing.” (P.15.)

“An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb.” (P.15.)

“The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no-one else did.” (P.16.)

“Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing he has learnt to fly without perching.” (P.16.)

“You can tell a ripe corn by its look.” (P.16.)

"Looking at a king's mouth one would think that he never sucked at his mother's breast."
(P.19.)

"Those whose palm kernels are cracked for them by a benevolent god should not forget to be humble." (P.19.)

"When a man says yes his chi says yes also." (P.19.)

- These twelve proverbs are from the first four chapters of *Things Fall Apart*. Explain what each of them means, and try to think of an English proverb that is roughly equivalent to each one.
- Divide the remaining chapters amongst the members of the class, and seek out more proverbs.
- Proverbs are said to enrich a language. If you agree that they do, how do they do this? If you do not agree that they do, what do you think they do instead?
- Why do you think fewer proverbs are used now than in your grandparents' day?
- What is the difference between a proverb and a cliché?

Setting

1. The Cultural Setting - Christianity and Empire

*The day Thou gavest, Lord, is ended
The darkness falls at Thy behest;
To Thee our morning hymns ascended,
Thy praise shall hallow now our rest.*

*We thank Thee that Thy Church unsleeping,
While earth rolls onward into light,
Through all the world her watch is keeping,
And rests not now by day or night.*

*As o'er each continent and island
The dawn leads on another day,
The voice of prayer is never silent,
Nor dies the strain of praise away.*

*The sun that bids us rest is waking
Our brethren 'neath the Western sky,
And hour by hour fresh lips are making
Thy wondrous doings heard on high.*

*Forbid it, Lord, Thy Church shall ever
Like earth's proud empires pass away;
But stand and rule, and grow for ever
Till all Thy creatures own Thy sway.*

- How many things link the Christian Church with this empire?
- What do you understand by the term 'The Empire on which the sun never sets'?
- Examine the language in this hymn. Which words are dignified by a capital letter? Why do you think this is?
- For what is the hymn writer thanking his Lord? Why does this state of affairs seem good to the hymn writer? Would it seem good to all mankind?
- What is the hymn writer's attitude to the British Empire?

3. The Geographical and Historical Setting

- Compile a wall display of interesting facts about Nigeria.
Encarta provides some information, including images and sound.

3. The Military Setting - Onward Christian Soldiers

Examine the passage on pp.126-127 where Okonkwo and Obierika discuss what happened in Abame.

- What is the relationship between the missionaries and the soldiers?
- Do you think the missionary who was killed in Abame would have wanted to be avenged?
- Do the soldiers make it easier for the missionaries to be effective?
- Do the missionaries make it easier for the soldiers to be effective?
- Are the soldiers Christian?

4. The Commercial Setting - An extract from *English Economic History* by GW Southgate, First Published 1935, revised 1965

'The tropical provinces of the British Empire include...large parts of the African continent. Some of these regions are not suitable for settlement by white men, and in these the European inhabitants include merely the officials who are concerned with carrying on the government, engineers in charge of public works, missionaries, and the representatives of banks and commercial houses. Such people may live in a tropical country for a number of years, but they do not make permanent homes there. They spend occasional holidays in Great Britain, and at the end of their period of service they return to this country. These tropical possessions are valuable to Great Britain since they supply her with many commodities otherwise unobtainable, or to be secured elsewhere only in small quantities and with difficulty. Such foodstuffs as tea, coffee, cocoa, sugar, oils, and spices, and such raw materials for British industries as cotton, jute, hemp, and rubber, are obtained from tropical regions. To an increasing extent the tropical possessions of Great Britain offer markets for her manufactured goods.'

Palm oil was the product from Nigeria that was most valued by the British in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was used in the manufacture of soap and margarine. It had to be shipped from Nigeria. It was supplied in large quantities, and it enabled Britain to manufacture soap and margarine at a reasonable price.

- What do these facts tell you about the number of Nigerians engaged in the production of palm oil?
- What do they tell you about how well Nigerian workers were paid to produce palm oil?
- The wages that were paid to Nigerian workers would increasingly be spent on what, according to the last sentence of the paragraph quoted above?
- How did each of the groups below gain from the situation?
- Of the following groups who gained most from this situation? Give your reasons.
 - a. Nigerian workers
 - b. British workers
 - c. European manufacturers
- Make a visual display, poster, flow chart, or other diagram, explaining how this system works.

5. The African Religious Setting

Okonkwo's religion is an Animist religion. This means that he believes that living and inanimate objects have spirits, and can affect human beings. He also worships his ancestors.

- What are some of the religious duties that Okonkwo performs?
- Does Okonkwo's religion ever make him behave more moderately, or less moderately?
- How does Okonkwo expect to spend his afterlife?

Section 6. A guided approach to selected passages

The death of Ikemefuna. P.40 *Okonkwo sat in his obi...* to the break on p. 43

- Is Ezeudu respected for what he is or for what he was? (Compare this passage with p6.)
- What do you think of his advice to Okonkwo? Is there a difference between killing someone who calls you father but who is not your son, and killing someone who calls you father when he is your son? Give reasons for your answer.
- Why do you suppose Okonkwo beat his son for weeping?
- How many people seem to know what is going to happen to Ikemefuna?
- Why is it happening?
- Why do you suppose Okonkwo goes to the rear and averts his eyes when Ikemefuna is struck down?
- Do you think Okonkwo would have taken part in the killing if Ikemefuna had not run towards him?
- What did the men of the party say of the men who had not come along with them?
- To what extent is Okonkwo's involvement in Ikemefuna's death a deliberate choice?

Chapter Ten. Law and the Gods

- What part do the women and children play in the ceremony?
- How is the atmosphere built up with sound and ceremony, before the egwugwu appear on the scene?
- What do you imagine is kept inside the egwugwu house?
- How many egwugwu are there, and why is this so?
- How are the egwugwu made to look impressive?
- How do the egwugwu address human beings, and what do human beings do in response?
- What is the approved response to the egwugwu's question *Do you know me?* On p136 what effect does Mr Smith and his interpreter's ignorance of the correct responses have on the situation regarding the church? (Refer to P134.) Do the Christians also have set responses?
- Consider the judgement on the marriage dispute. Do you think it is fair to the wife, the wife's family, the husband and the children? Do you think that they will all do as they have been told? Why/why not?

Pp. 77 -78 Okonkwo at his tenderest

- Who is Ekwefi and who is Ezinma?
- Why does Ekwefi want to follow Chielo and Ezinma into the cave? Why does she not dare to?
- Why do you think Okonkwo's presence reassures Ekwefi that her daughter is safe?
- Ekwefi reflects on her marriage to Okonkwo. Would you call it an arranged marriage or a love match? What are your reasons?

... and p. 80 bottom paragraph

- What does Okonkwo's behaviour show about his feelings for Ekwefi and Ezinma?
- Can you find any other occasion on which Okonkwo displays a more tender side to his nature?

Pp.138 -140 The visit to the District Commissioner

- Why did the six leaders go to see the District Commissioner when asked?
- Why did they take machetes with them but not guns?
- Why do the six leaders allow themselves to be tricked by the District Commissioner?
- Would the six leaders have behaved in a similar way themselves towards the District Commissioner? Why/why not?
- The District Commissioner orders his men to treat the leaders with respect, but they inflict many indignities on them. How do you account for this?
- Can you see any link between this treatment of the six leaders and the Christian gospel?
- Write the paragraph that the District Commissioner will put in his book about this incident.
- Do you think that the District Commissioner is aware that his men are increasing the fine to enrich themselves? Why/not?

Section 7. Activities to explore the text

Exploring concepts of civilization

- Provide students with the following definition of civilization and invite discussion: 'An advanced state of human society, in which a high level of art, science, religion and government has been reached.'
Following general discussion, ask students to fill in the table provided as a worksheet on p.23. This will provide an initial comparison between the society of Umuofia and contemporary Victoria.
- Draw up a class list, with which all class members agree, of the main features of civilization.
- Students should provide written responses to the following questions
 - Does Victoria qualify as being civilized according to this definition? Justify your answer.
 - Do the nine villages of Umuofia qualify as being civilized according to this definition? Justify your answer.
 - Does any society ever consider itself to be uncivilized? If so, under what circumstances? If not, why not?

The Pen is mightier than the machete

The people of Umuofia did not have a written language. According to the anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, in his work *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871, this meant that they were members of a primitive tribe.

However, the people of Umuofia have a rich oral tradition. They have proverbs and fables. They produce orators, and they make fun of the way other people speak. Instead of recognizing these features of language as the sign of a developing culture, the District Commissioner's conclusion is that "one of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words." (P. 148.)

- What implications does the fact that there was no written tradition have for Chinua Achebe's writing of this novel?
- On p104, the people of Mbanta make fun of the missionary's interpreter who is an Ibo man, but who speaks a different dialect from them.
- What does this incident show about the Africans' attitude to the newcomers?
- Is there a difference in their attitude on p.125, when they refer to the court messengers as 'ashy buttocks'? Try to account for any difference.

Mr Brown sets up a school in Umuofia where students learn to read, write and speak English. (P.130.) A few months in this school enable one to become a court messenger or a court clerk. These were new jobs using new technologies, and they gave power, under the white men, to a new group of people. By setting up a new elite, the white man is able to disempower the old elite.

- Write a paragraph to explain how the displaced elite would feel about this situation.
- Can you see any parallel with modern day Australia?

Representing folk stories

Throughout the text a number of folk stories are retold. Some of these are:

1. P.38. The quarrel between the earth and sky.
 2. P.54. The mosquito and the ear.
 3. P.60. Why the snake lizard killed his mother.
 4. P.69. Tortoise and the feast in the sky.
 5. P.100. Mother Kite, the Duck and the Hen.
- As a class, agree on a way of presenting these folk stories visually. This could be a wall display, a collection of comic strips, a book written for children, a power point presentation, or any other idea that occurs to you. Divide into five groups, and present one story each in the agreed format.

Role Play

The white men do not speak the language of the people of Umuofia. Their interpreters do not speak exactly the same language, and are capable of distorting translations deliberately as well as accidentally. In groups of three, all speaking English, prepare to role-play one of the following situations. The first speaker should try to explain carefully. The interpreter should get the odd word wrong, by accident, and may deliberately try to change part of the story for ease of translation. The person receiving the information should ask questions to try to make sense of the information.

1. Through an interpreter, Mr Brown tries to explain the Christmas Story to Akunna.
 2. Nwoye tries to explain to Mr Smith, through an interpreter, who Ikemefuna was, and what happened to him and why.
 3. Through an interpreter, a mother tries to explain to the District Commissioner that she has not murdered her twin babies, but that, according to custom, they have been left in the Evil Forest to die.
 4. Ezinma tries to explain to a female missionary, through an interpreter, that polygamy has its good points in terms of looking after women and children.
 5. A missionary tries to explain to a group of Umuofian women, through an interpreter, that she thinks they should wear more clothes.
 6. Obierika goes back to the District Commissioner, and through an interpreter, tries to explain what the egwugwu are, and why it was so serious when one of them was 'killed'.
 7. Obiageli explains to a female missionary, through an interpreter, that Ezinma was an ogbanje, and what this means.
 8. Mr Brown enquires, through an interpreter, why Obierika is drinking his palm wine out of a human skull. He freely expresses his views on the subject.
 9. Mr Brown enquires, through an interpreter, why Okonkwo is drinking his palm wine out of a human skull. He freely expresses his views on the subject. Similar to the above, but perhaps with a different outcome.
- Perform your prepared role-play to the class.

Gender Roles

- In Umuofia the gender roles are very strict. Make a list of all the activities that are deemed appropriate for men and boys, and for women and girls.
- What advantages does each gender seem to enjoy over the other gender?
- Stage a debate on the motion, 'In Achebe's Umuofia, it was preferable to be a man.'

Things Fall Apart : Topics for Writing

Section 1 questions

- If Okonkwo is to be seen as a tragic hero, then he must have a fatal flaw. What fatal flaw do you see in Okonkwo's character, and how does fate play upon it to bring about his downfall?
- "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself, and now he will be buried like a dog...." Obierika upbraids the District Commissioner with these words. To what extent is this an accurate analysis of the situation?
- Okonkwo's friend, Obierika, lives on at the end of the novel. What differences in character between Okonkwo and Obierika lead to this difference in life span?
- What purposes does the inclusion of female characters serve in this novel, and what might be the effect if they were omitted?
- 'Although a stern patriarch and a fierce warrior, Okonkwo has a softer and more generous side to his nature.' Do you agree?

Section 2 questions

- 'With the possible exception of the Christian religion, the white men brought nothing of value to the people of Umuofia.' Do you agree?
- 'The oral story-telling tradition of West Africa, which is featured in the novel, clearly lives on in Achebe's style of writing.' Do you agree?
- '*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* is an entirely appropriate title for the District Commissioner's proposed book.' Discuss.
- If Achebe's intention in *Things Fall Apart* is to encourage those who are not African by descent to doubt the motives of the colonialists, what techniques does he use to this end, and to what extent do you think he succeeds?
- Does Achebe present an obviously biased account of the arrival of white men in West Africa, or does he present a balanced view of the benefits of change as well as the dispossession of the people?

Creative Responses

- Obierika invites Nwoye to his obi to discuss the life and death of Okonkwo. Write an account of what happens there and what is said.
- The District Commissioner writes a letter to his brother, an officer in the British Army, stationed in England. He gives an account of his work in Umuofia. Write this letter.
- Okonkwo's three wives talk in private about Okonkwo's fate, how they felt about Okonkwo when he was alive, and what the future holds for them. Record their conversation.

Worksheet to accompany activities on p P17

Art/Science	Victoria	Umuofia
	<p><i>Who are the artists?</i></p> <p><i>And how do they exhibit their art?</i></p>	<p><i>Who were the artists?</i></p> <p><i>And how did they exhibit their art?</i></p>
	<p><i>Is Science encouraged to flourish in Victoria today? If so, by what means</i></p>	<p><i>What were the limits to technology and Science in Umuofia?</i></p>
Religion	<p><i>What restraining effects does religion have in Victoria today?</i></p>	<p><i>What restraining effects did religion have in Umuofia?</i></p>
Welfare	<p><i>How does the society look after the poor?</i></p>	<p><i>How did the society look after the poor?</i></p>
	<p><i>What makes this a good or bad society in which to live?</i></p>	<p><i>What made this a good or bad society in which to live?</i></p>