

Reading Guide
Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*

Characters, Places, and Organizations:

- Obi Okonkwo. Grandson of Okonkwo from *Things Fall Apart*.
- Isaac Okonkwo: Obi's father, convert to Christianity
- Hannah Okonkwo: wife of Isaac; convert to Christianity. Very ill.
- Clara: Obi's girlfriend and fiancé. Also an *osu*
- Joseph: friend of Obi in Lagos; also from Umuofia
- Christopher: friend of Obi and notorious womanizer
- Sam Okoli: politician and friend of Clara
- Mr. Green. Obi's boss.
- Marie: Mr. Green's secretary.
- Elsie Mark: girl seeking Obi's help with school entrance interview
- Lagos: Capital of colony of Nigeria
- Umuofia: Ibo village in eastern Nigeria
- Umuofia Progressive Union: organization for former residents of Umuofia; branches throughout Nigeria

Background:

Chinua Achebe is a native Nigerian, raised by Christian parents in Nigeria, who now lives, writes, and teaches in the United States. His first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1959) chronicles the arrival of the British in the 1890s in what we now call Nigeria. In this novel, Achebe explores the culture of the Igbo people of Umuofia in Nigeria before the arrival of Europeans, and then portrays how the arrival of the Europeans in Africa transforms Igbo culture. The main character is a man named Okonkwo, and most of the novel focuses on Okonkwo and his family members. Achebe explores many elements of Igbo culture, including religion, patterns of social hierarchy and social mobility, political system, rituals and traditions, system of justice, local economy, and familial patterns. He then shows how the arrival of the Europeans quickly and substantively transforms the community.

Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), is a form of "sequel" to *Things Fall Apart*. The novel takes place in the mid 1950s when Great Britain is still in control of Nigeria (which would gain independence in 1960). However, talk of independence is in the air, and the novel conveys the looming inevitability of this independence. Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of Okonkwo from *Things Fall Apart*, has just returned from completing his degree in English in England. The novel depicts his efforts to reintegrate into life in Nigeria and deal with the various challenges that confront him.

Questions to consider while reading:

1. Why does the novel begin with a poem by T.S. Eliot?
2. Why does the novel depict Obi's trial before it tells the story of events leading up to the trial?
3. Is Obi anything like his father? His mother?
4. What role does religion play in the novel? How does Isaac view the role of Christianity and tradition in dealing with his family?
5. In what ways is this novel an "African novel"? In what ways is it an "English novel"?
6. What role does language play in the novel?
7. Why does Achebe call the novel "No Longer at Ease"? The title implies that there was once a time of ease, but do you sense that there was ever any such time? Why/why not?
8. How does the novel portray "bribery"? Why is corruption such an important issue in the novel?
9. How is "Nigeria" presented in the novel?
10. How does the novel deal with the idea of "civilization"?
11. How do you interpret the character of Clara?
12. How does the novel deal with the matter of race?
13. What do you make of Mr. Green's various opinions of the "African"?
14. How does one acquire status in Nigeria? Why is it so important to maintain status?
15. How do you interpret Obi's development over the course of the novel? Why does he change?