

Things Fall Apart is a fiction novel written by Chinua Achebe and was published in 1958.<sup>1</sup> The novel follows the story of a man named Okonkwo as he grows in modern day Nigeria as a member of the Umuofia clan. The novel is divided into three sections that reflect different periods in Okonkwo's life. The first section follows his early life and the development of his reputation, and power within the clan. The second and third sections follow the introduction of British imperialism. When the story begins, Okonkwo is a young man who is very famous beyond his own village for his powerful strength. He is a man showing great promise, despite the reputation of his family.<sup>2</sup> As the story progresses, Okonkwo faces challenges from within his village and from outside his village. At some points, he faces opposition from the chief elders of his village and struggles to make his son strong.<sup>3</sup> Then, as the novel progresses, the challenges become greater with Okonkwo forced into exile for seven years because his gun exploded and accidentally killed a fellow clansman.<sup>4</sup> In the second section of the novel, there is a critical plot point developed with the introduction of Europeans to the village. These Europeans are missionaries that attempt to convert the villagers, eventually finding success with the poorest villagers. However, there are several incidents between the missionaries and the Africans. At one point, a missionary takes a mask off of an egwugwu, which is seen as killing an ancestral spirit.<sup>5</sup> This results in violence against the missionaries. At the end of the novel, as Okonkwo's way of life is falling apart because of the new Europeans and their traditions, he kills himself.<sup>6</sup> The District Commissioner hearing this news decides to include that information in the book he is writing on his time in West Africa, entitled "The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. (New York: First Edition Anchor Books, 1994), copyright page

<sup>2</sup> Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. Chapter 1

<sup>3</sup> Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. Chapter 2-3

<sup>4</sup> Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. Chapter 13-14

<sup>5</sup> Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. Page

<sup>6</sup> Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. Chapter 25

<sup>7</sup> Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. Chapter 25

In the 1950s and 1960s, the continent of Africa had exploded with decolonization movements. The Pan-African movement had grown and was gaining support from all over the world, not just in Africa. At the time, this novel was revolutionary when it was published in 1958. When this novel was published, African voices were often left out of the global narrative of African history. Chinua Achebe had the intention of writing an African story from an African perspective for Western audiences.<sup>8</sup> He was attempting to push back against the overwhelmingly Western-dominated narrative about Africa and its history. At the time, there were no novels written by African authors and distributed to Western audiences on a wide scale. Achebe made the decision to write the story in English due to its universal nature and he wanted the story to reach a wide audience. The novel is now widely studied throughout the world and is regarded as the archetypal African novel.<sup>9</sup>

Given the context in which this novel was written, historians can draw conclusions about the decolonization movement that was happening throughout the mid-20th century. They can begin to understand the feelings of Pan Africanists and their strong desires to see African states gain their political independence from the various European powers that had maintained control over their resources and land, as well as had forced Africans all over the continent to be second class citizens in their own countries. Historians can begin to use the novel to develop an understanding of the African perspective on colonization.

The story itself gives context for historians and enables them to better understand African history and culture before the introduction of colonization. Oftentimes, African history is focused on the eras of colonization and decolonization which forces it to be inherently Western centric.

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<sup>8</sup> Ruth Franklin. "After Empire: Chinua Achebe and the Great African Novel," *The New Yorker*. 26 May 2008  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/05/26/after-empire>

<sup>9</sup> Franklin. "After Empire: Chinua Achebe and the Great African Novel"

However, despite the story being fictionalized, it provides an overview of African life and traditions. In the novel, there are various examples of these traditions and their influence on the daily life of all of the characters. Okonkwo represents African traditions and values. He is strong, driven, determined, a protector of his people and a provider to his family. He has a favorable reputation for much of the book. However, he is also a warrior. He represents a fighting Africa, ready to defend itself and its traditions. However, it is clear from the lack of support from his clan that there is no desire to go to war against the missionaries. This reaction by the rest of the clan represents the Africans who were willing to work in cooperation with the British. This detail in the story also seeks to dehomogenize the African voice. With many Western imperial narratives, the little perspective written by the colonized culture is often so small that it is forced into one voice, ignoring the diversity within those groups themselves. Achebe's intention here is to make it clear that there was internal debate and thought within the communities that were colonized by the British.

It is likely that his suicide at the end of the novel represents the end of African autonomy with the introduction of white imperialism. The novel ends with the District Commissioner who has come to the village to diffuse the escalating tensions between the missionaries and Africans being told of Okonkwo's suicide. After seeing Okonkwo's dead body, he decides that the rich and vibrant story of Okonkwo deserves a paragraph or two in his new book. Achebe is very subtle in his message to the reader. However, Achebe is clearly positioning the British as unfeeling and methodical. Achebe is suggesting that the British Commissioner, who represents imperial interests, is simplifying the story of Okonkwo, and the Umuofia clan to make it easy for Westerners to understand, and colonize. This directly links back to Achebe's initial intention for the novel itself. His intention was to give depth and texture to the rich history of Africa and to

combat the oversimplified and homogenous image that the British Empire had perpetuated to the rest of the world for decades.

Historians are aware that all primary sources will come with a limitation of some kind. There is no such thing as a perfect source, and the novel *Things Fall Apart* is no exception. Achebe draws on his personal experiences as an Igbo to write about a fictionalized village in lower Nigeria. However, this novel is still fiction meaning that there is not going to be a large amount of specific information to be used for academic purposes. However, the novel and the circumstances under which it was published provide a fascinating alternative to the Western narrative about the impact of colonization.

In conclusion, the novel *Things Fall Apart* can be a useful primary source that historians could use to further understand the devastating effects of colonization. Chinua Achebe writes the novel as a critique of the imperial system, highlighting the ways that cultural and economic domination has on localized cultures, focusing on the Umuofia tribe in modern day Nigeria under British imperial rule. It is clearly documented that much of imperial history is written based on European government documents. Those written sources do have their own merits, but it discredits the significance of oral traditions throughout Africa. This novel works to undo that Western dominated understanding of colonial history. It is important that stories, fictionalized or otherwise, that include African perspectives be included in the understanding and development of the history of Nigeria, Great Britain, and their shared history- particularly when it comes to imperial history.

## Sources

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26 May 2008 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/05/26/after-empire>