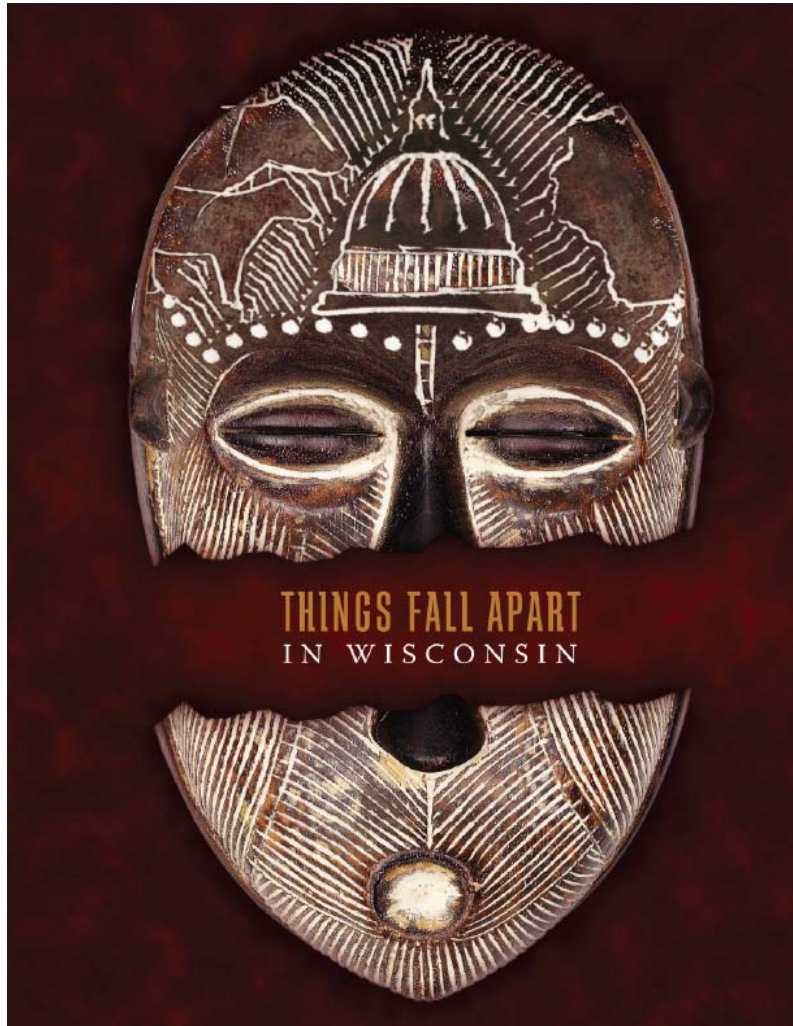


Teaching *Things Fall Apart* In Wisconsin

A Resource Guide for Educators



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Introduction and Overview

A thematic approach to close reading

First published in 1958, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is easily the most recognizable and widely taught African novel in the U.S. It has been translated into at least 50 languages, and sold over 10 million copies worldwide, and has appeared on many "greatest books of all times" lists around the world. But why? What is it about this classic story of transformation and tragedy that makes this book so attractive to students and educators? In some ways, the book has come to represent Africa as a continent: it serves as a symbol of the injustices of colonization and the internal forces that helped lead to the complete take-over of Nigeria by the British colonialists. But it has also become a symbol of postcolonial possibility, and the important task the African writer takes up when attempting to reclaim or rewrite the stories of his or her people. Because of this, educators have a double burden in teaching this highly teachable book: they must both fully contextualize the novel in its own time and place, and they must keep central to their approach to the text a constant reminder that while we can learn much about the truths of the colonial experience through this text, it is a work of fiction, not a historical or anthropological tool for understanding contemporary Africa in all its complexity and diversity.

To do this, we suggest that the book be taught from a thematic framework which relies on the close reading of key passages, emphasizing the relationship between the form and content of the novel and helping students navigate the development of key characters and themes to negotiate how they create meaning in a Wisconsin classroom. When taught from this perspective, the book opens up worlds of opportunities for students to connect to the text, appreciate its great literary merit, and gain a greater understanding of the themes and issues developed in its pages.

How to Use this Guide

The lesson plans and activities provided in this guide are designed to allow you the opportunity to tailor the way you teach the novel to your own course, interests, and goals. The individual units could be taught over one or several days, and you can mix and match ideas from the various sections to put together your own syllabus. Each section includes project ideas, study/discussion questions, and suggestions for further teaching of the theme or issue covered, as well as recommendations for material and concepts to be covered in lecture. Discussion questions can be used as prompts for in-class discussion, or for small group activities or in-class writing assignments.

Logistics for teaching the lessons in this guide

The lesson plans included in this guide have been sorted into nine units that can be taught in any sequence, but all of them except the first two generally assume that students have

completed the entire novel. This guide is designed to accommodate curricula plans that devote anywhere from two weeks to an entire semester to the novel, and there are basically two ways you could approach the novel:

Option A: **Thematic model** (read the entire text, then discuss)

To ensure that students have time to read the novel, the first two units cover background and provide historical and cultural context for the novel, and if you don't have time to assign the reading earlier, you could use this time (one to two weeks) to assign the reading of the entire text, and then use the rest of the lesson plans to focus on specific passages of your choosing. The lesson plans included in this guide are designed for teachers using this model, but can easily be adapted for Option B.

Option B: **Chronological/linear model** (discuss chapter by chapter, or in three parts)

You could customize these units by teaching the book by following the novel chronologically, and picking out themes covered in the lesson plans to focus on in each chapter or section. Since most of the themes addressed in Part One are further developed in Part Two, you could return to these themes as the students finish the reading. This plan lends itself well to a 3- or 4-week model: Part One of the novel – Chapters 1-13 (p. 3-125) could easily be read in one week (two if you have time), and Part Two – Chapters 14-19 (p. 129-167) – could be read in week two, and Part Three – Chapters 20-25 (p. 171-209) could be discussed in week three. Even with as few as two weeks to teach the novel, you could cover Part One in week one and Parts Two and Three in the second week.

Suggested Preparatory Readings and student materials (handouts) are all available online at: <http://www.humanities.wisc.edu/programs/great-texts/things-fall-apart/center-resources.html>. While these readings are optional (with the exception of the readings recommended in Unit One), they have been carefully selected to provide background, context and content analysis for each specific unit and teachers should find them enormously helpful in preparing to teach the book.

Homework, Projects and Student Materials (available online)

Each unit is accompanied with supplementary materials, study questions and project ideas which can be used to develop handouts and classroom aids. After surveying the wealth of information available online for this text, we felt no need to reinvent the wheel in this department, and point you to handy handouts available online whenever possible. Teachers should preview these materials carefully however, and make efforts to avoid using materials which present the text ahistorically or without taking into account the status of the text as fiction. There are many resources out there and navigating them can be rather overwhelming. Many of these resources tend to present the novel exclusively from an anthropological perspective – as an “example” of authentic “African culture.” And while the book does indeed open up discussions of Ibo life and culture, this is only a small part of the text's value and probably one of its more superficial ones at that. It does both the novel and our students

disservice to allow Ibo culture to stand in for all of African culture, which, it should be stressed, is extraordinarily diverse, even within Nigeria itself. We have made efforts to point you toward the best web resources we could find on the novel, and encourage you to make use of the recommended materials found in this guide.

Close Reading Strategies

Most of the lessons in this guide revolve around or depend upon close reading of specific passages in the text (of your choice) in order to generate discussion and build meaning as a class. “Close reading” here means careful examination of a portion of the text, which emphasizes the particular over the general and uses textual evidence to support one’s interpretation. Close reading works best when the selected passage is either read aloud or distributed as a handout, and accompanied by discussion questions. It also lends itself well to group work and small-group discussions, and is an excellent way for students to learn both critical thinking and analysis skills as they make connections, use evidence to support their views, and discuss the impact of fiction. For close reading to work successfully, it’s important that the teacher always remind the students to point to the passage/line/phrase/word that supports their position as they share their ideas. Close reading teaches students the difference between “opinion” or “personal reaction” and “analysis.”

Lecture Points

Each unit in this guide contains a set of lecture points. These are the ideas and concepts we recommend you cover in class, but you should feel free to add, adjust and customize these ideas to fit your own goals and objectives for the unit. Since every teacher has a different teaching a preparation style, we just provide some basic tools here – the goal was to provide enough information that teachers who wanted to could construct an entire unit out of the materials, but leave room for flexibility and adaptation to different course and teaching needs. Whatever your approach, lecture should always model the sort of close reading you want the students to perform by using as many examples from the text as possible to support and reinforce your points.

A Note of Caution on Plagiarism

As with other “great texts,” there is a wealth of information readily available on *Things Fall Apart*, which can be tempting material to plagiarize from the web or other study guides. Teachers may consider discussing their policies on academic honesty and the differences between paraphrasing, summarizing, citation and undocumented use of other sources. It’s also recommended that teachers make plagiarism less likely by customizing their assignments to their classes and avoiding generic and widely-used prompts for take-home essay assignments or longer projects.

For further information

If you have any questions about this guide, or would like additional information on any of the materials included here, please feel free to contact the author, **Heather DuBois Bourenane**, at

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Lesson Plans and Activities

Unit 1: Background and Contexts – When Fiction Meets History

While it offers a certain perspective on colonial history, *Things Fall Apart* is not a strictly historical novel. Historical novels, by definition, fictionalize historic events and bring them to life with invented details, characters, dialogue, etc. And while *Things Fall Apart* does situate itself within a specific historical *context* (Nigeria at the moment of colonization), it does not attempt to recreate actual events or re-characterize real historical figures. In other words, while it is engaged with the historical theme of colonialism in Nigeria and Igbo culture, it is wholly fiction, and should be understood and taught as such. In addition, it is very important to keep in mind the historicity of the novel itself: the book is set in the 1890s, but was first published in 1958, 2 years before Nigeria was granted full independence from British rule. This means that we are bringing a postcolonial sensibility and perspective to the text and should bear in mind the many ways in which Nigerian politics, culture and attitudes have changed in the last 50 years. So the novel is not wholly historical, nor wholly contemporary, as much as it can help us learn about both the past and understand themes of value to the present.

Objective:

Introduce students to the role of fiction in understanding colonial history, and provide background and context for the novel and the author.

"The last four or five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and Africans in very lurid terms. The reason for this had to do with the need to justify the slave trade and slavery. ... This continued until the Africans themselves, in the middle of the twentieth century, took into their own hands the telling of their story." (Chinua Achebe, "An African Voice", *The Atlantic*)

Preparatory Reading:

The following three essays by Achebe should be considered required reading before teaching *Things Fall Apart*:

"The Novelist as Teacher" by Chinua Achebe

"Teaching *Things Fall Apart*" by Chinua Achebe

"An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" by Chinua Achebe

<http://kirbyk.net/hod/image.of.africa.html>

(NOTE: any of these short readings could also be suitable for students, particularly in AP literature or history courses)

Additional Readings and Resources:

- “Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” by Martin Klein (from *African Novels in the Classroom*)
- “Africans Live in Tribes, Don’t They?” by Curtis Keim, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind* (2009)
- Discussion of Achebe’s response to Conrad
<http://www.rlwclarke.net/Courses/LITS2306/2008-2009/13CAchebeAnImageofAfricaRacismInConrad%27sHeartofDarkness.pdf>
- Nigerian History online:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/1067695.stm
- African History timelines:
<http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/timelines/htimelinetoc.htm>
- The Story of Africa (African History from an African Perspective -BBC)
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/index.shtml>

Handout/presentation materials

- The “**Teaching Colonial Representation**” file (online) includes advertisements, quotes and diagrams of colonial power structures is included
- **Chinua Achebe** biography and bibliography handout (online)

Lecture points:

Using the preparatory materials above, the lecture should contextualize the novel by covering the following:

- A brief history of precolonial Nigeria and the colonization of Africa
- 1958, first publication of *Things Fall Apart*
- Nigeria: British colony from end of 19th c. until 1960
- 1967-70 Biafran War (Igbo secession)
- Major ethnic groups (70% of population): Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo
- Est. 2005 pop of Nigeria: 128 million
- Tumultuous political history since independence; many of Achebe’s other books confront corruption in politics, social issues
- Identify Nigeria on the map of Africa, and the approximate setting for the fictional village of Umuofia in the novel
- Discuss the people, languages and religions of Nigeria today, as well as any political or popular news you feel is relevant to your course
- Discuss why context is important to understanding the novel
- Provide background information on Achebe and his life, other works, career, etc
- Be sure to remind your students to make use of the glossary in the back of the book.
- Let them know they will be responsible for the terms and concepts Achebe presents.
- Discussion of the colonialist, Eurocentric representations of African history and how the novel directly confronts these. Discuss how “history” is an imperfect record of

events and is subject to the biases and perspectives of those who record it. Discuss the role of objectivity and integrity in contemporary historiography.

- This is the perfect opportunity to also set some ground rules as a class for what kind of language is and is not appropriate/respectful when talking about Africa. Using “How To Write About Africa” by Binyavanga Wainaina could be a good way to bring up the issue of stereotypes and misconceptions about Africa
- Introduce the concept of understanding and analyzing fiction and using close reading to create meaning in the Wisconsin classroom
- Discuss the author’s contention that his work has (at least partly) a didactic role in terms of “re-teaching” the history of Africa in a more positive light.
 - Use this idea to discuss:
 - What this means to American readers? Are we “outsiders?”
 - The role of fiction/literature in understanding history
 - Whether or not fiction can “revise” history. What does this really mean?

Discussion Questions:

- What is fiction?
- What is history?
- Find Nigeria on the map of Africa. Discuss its features.
- Compare contemporary, colonial and pre-colonial maps of Africa. Discuss their features.
- What does “diversity” mean in Nigeria as compared to the US?
- What are stereotypes? How do certain words promote a negative impression of Africa or Africans?
 - What is problematic about the following terms: tribe, hut, savage, primitive, backward, timeless, primordial, (etc)? Why are these terms problematic? Why might some people find them offensive or disparaging?
- Who is Chinua Achebe?
- Who lives in Nigeria?
- What are the official languages of Nigeria? How many languages are spoken throughout the country? How many cultural or ethnic groups can you find on the map (see supplementary materials for linguistic and ethnic maps of Nigeria)?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- **Reading/Response Journal.** Now is a good time to ask your students to keep a reflection journal in which they respond to the text and material covered in class. You might design this assignment thematically (by assigning a theme or issue – say “family” or “power”) and ask them to explore how they see that theme reflected in the various units you cover. Or you could ask them to simply write 1-2 pages of personal response to the text, to find points of identification or highlight confusing or problematic passages. Or you could use the discussion questions in these lesson plans to create your own **guided journal** – a handout of prompts to which you require the students to

respond when reading each chapter/section of the novel. This could be an on-going project, a group activity, or an in-class writing assignment at the end of each class period.

- Have students write an **essay** in which they reflect on the relationship between history and fiction, and think of their own example of a “truth” of fiction and a “fallacy” or misconception of history (e.g. “Christopher Columbus discovered America”).
- **Use the handout/presentation materials** in the “**Teaching Colonial Representation**” file (online) to create an assignment for your students that asks them to reflect on (mis)representations of Africa in the media and popular culture. You might ask them to find a movie, tv show, advertisement or song that reproduces a negative stereotype and then relate that to Achebe’s project of combating misrepresentation of African history. Ask students to think of what stereotypes or generalizations are applied to their own [ethnic, cultural, religious, family, social] group and reflect on how/why those generalizations are problematic or misleading.
- **Diversity project:** Nigeria’s population is diverse in many ways: ethnically, linguistically, religiously, economically, geographically, etc. To drive home the point that the Ibo people represented in the book are only one of many cultural groups in Nigeria, and encourage them to learn more about Nigerian culture, have students do some internet research to learn more about contemporary (and/or colonial) Nigeria. Have them find videos of artists or musicians from different linguistic groups so they can hear the difference in the languages. Ask them to find information on Yoruba cosmology so they can see how dramatically it differs from the Ibo belief system Achebe depicts in the novel. Ask them to find articles on current issues, conflicts, politics and events, or popular literature and culture (television programs, pop music, cartoons, etc). Bring these to class and discuss how they compare/contrast to the fictional world of the novel.

Suggestions for expanding this unit

If you have time, you could spend an infinite amount of it covering colonial history, postcolonial Africa, and/or the larger topic of representation and stereotypes. There are several useful films that could be used in this unit, and you might check out the UW-Madison’s African Studies Program film collection, which allows you to borrow (free of charge). They can even arrange shipping if you’re outside of Madison. Browse the catalogue at: <http://africa.wisc.edu/outreach/catalogue.pdf>. To expand the history or background units, you might start with some of the web resources provided in this guide.

Unit 2: Igbo Society and Culture in *Things Fall Apart*

2A. Igbo Culture and Beliefs and their Role in the Novel

2B. Religion and Society: “The Second Coming”

2C. Social norms, Social structures

Titles and caste

Social Structure

2D. Cultural contacts and contrasts: What do the Ibo of the story have in common with the Europeans in the story? How do they differ?

There are many ways that one could approach or introduce the topic of Igbo culture in *Things Fall Apart*, but to avoid exoticism or presenting the Igbo characters as “cultural others,” it’s recommended that teachers focus on understanding key cultural concepts that are crucial to the text’s major themes and plot. Many of these cultural elements – such as the use of proverbs and storytelling – become themes in the novel which help us make sense of the text’s larger meaning. Looking at the representation of Igbo culture as part of the text’s larger project – as opposed to being “cultural tourists” in the fictional landscape of the novel – provides a productive framework for understanding the other themes that emerge in relation to this central issue (gender and power relations, family, etc). It is also important to stress here that Achebe is using artistic license to fictionalize his people and emphasize certain characters and features in order to develop the plot and specific themes in the novel. In this respect, the novel cannot be seen as anthropological or ethnographic since it is a work of fiction.

Objective: Help students better understand and engage with key Igbo cultural concepts developed in the text so that they can better relate to the story and appreciate the complexity of the novel.

Lecture Points: Referring to as many specific examples in the text as possible, lecture might cover some or all of the Ibo cultural concepts discussed in the book:

- Proverbs (“the palm-oil with which words are eaten” 5)
- Define cosmology and religion and use the Igbo Cosmology handout (online) to teach the Igbo system of gods, intermediaries and humans
- *Chi* – personal god; can be controlled by humans
- Social structure and hierarchy of Igbo society
 - Titled and untitled citizens
 - *Egwugwu* (masquerades) – men and titled men; masks as primary visual art of Ibo
 - *Osu* (outcasts)
- Polygamy and family structure (compound living within village system)
- System of villages, shared governance, laws. Communication methods (drum, messengers, envoys)

- Matriarchal or patriarchal? Gender roles don't necessarily correspond to Western categories. Eg: "Mother is Supreme" (133) [see gender unit for more on this]
- Drums and *ogene* as metaphors for the "heart" of the people – "The drums were still beating, persistent and unchanging. Their sound was no longer a separate thing from the living village. It was like the pulsation of its heart" (44).

Preparatory Reading:

- "Igbo Metaphysics in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" by Jude Chudi Okpala
- "Achebe and Duality in Igbo Thought" by Anthonia C. Kalu (*Modern Critical Interpretations: Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart*, ed. Harold Bloom 2002)
- "Igbo Society and the Parameters of Individual Accomplishment in *Things Fall Apart*" by Clement Okafor (*Modern Critical Interpretations: Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart*, ed. Harold Bloom 2002)
- "Talking About 'Tribe'" Africa Action <http://www.africaaction.org/bp/ethall.htm>
- University of Iowa's Igbo information page: <http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/toc/people/Igbo.html>

Handout/presentation materials

- **Handout:** Ibo Cosmology Chart (online)

Discussion Questions:

- Who are the Igbo people? Where do they live? What is their life like? How have their customs and traditions changed since the 1880s? Since the 1950s?
- What do they believe? Describe their religious system and the hierarchy of Igbo cosmology.
- What is the concept of *ogbanje* (77) and how is it important to the novel?
- What other cultural concepts in the book are unique to Igbo people? Why do you think Achebe includes these? What do they tell us about Igbo people and their beliefs in the novel?
- What are "kola nuts" and how are they used in the novel? What do they represent or symbolize?
- Discuss the idea of "cultural tourism." Do you feel like an outsider or voyeur when you read some of these passages? Explain.
- What elements of Igbo culture and society are similar to your own? What elements differ?

Suggested passages for close reading

- The *ogbanje* scene with Ezinma

- P. 124-125, which describe the legal ramifications for Okonkwo's crime, and Obierika reflects on the justice of such laws.
- Any of the passages that deal with the throwing out of twins into the Evil Forest

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Make a list of proverbs found in the novel (or have students make the list themselves, as homework) and ask students to discuss what they mean. If possible, ask them to think of idioms or proverbs in English that sum up the same or similar idea.
- Make use of the "Village of Umuofia" online simulation project (see Online Resources in this guide) or do internet research to find visual aids and illustrations of Igbo life.
- Vocab quizzes. You may consider a weekly (or section-by-section) vocabulary quiz to make sure your students fully understand the Igbo concepts and terms used in the novel, as well as the ones you're introducing in lecture.
- You might also ask students to keep a log of the Igbo cultural concepts and vocabulary words like one found here
http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson_images/lesson343/Igbo_Voc_Log.pdf

Suggestions for expanding this unit

The Language Debate: Achebe is a major player in the on-going debate on the question of language choice in African literature. While Achebe insists he can express his point of view as well in English as any other medium, others maintain that the language of former colonizer is insufficient for either expressing independence or conveying cultural concepts. Assign the two texts below (or summarize them in lecture) and expand this unit by discussing the relationship between language, culture and identity.

Required texts on the language debate:

Chinua Achebe, "The African Writer and the English Language"
 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature"

Unit 3: Gender in *Things Fall Apart*

American students often have a knee-jerk reaction to the way women are depicted in this novel, and see the text as sexist, and Okonkwo as the ultimate chauvinist. And it's true: Achebe goes to great pains to demonstrate how Okonkwo's skewed view of gender roles has an impact on both his thinking and his actions. However, this theme is much more complex and sophisticated than being simply a matter of "male" and "female" tensions; it provokes serious discussion of how these interact, where they overlap, how both Igbo and European societies may have problematic assessments of gender roles, and so on. One important thing to keep in mind when teaching gender in the novel is that Okonkwo's view does not represent the "norm" of Igbo thought in this text; there are many illustrations of how his distorted interpretation of gendered roles is what leads to trouble in his life. Having your students find and identify these moments in the text would be a great assignment. Themes of gender and engendered meaning play an enormous role in the novel, and you could approach this theme from several perspectives:

- By character, with a focus on the relationship between Okonkwo and Nwoye and Okonkwo and Ezinma
- By looking at language and how so many everyday things and concepts have gendered meaning for the Igbo people in the novel. You could look at traditional roles for men and women within Igbo society, and discuss what it means to be "a man" (or a woman) in the novel. Think, too, about how individual concepts and ideas are associated with gender, and what this means to the novel as a whole.
- By analyzing the role of kinship, family and the role of the extended family that is central to Okonkwo's story – as well as the distinction between "motherland" and "fatherland" and "matriarchal" vs "patriarchal" perspectives in the text.
- By analyzing Okonkwo and his deepest fear: becoming like his father, who he feels is feminine and weak. Contrast Okonkwo's view with that of other, more moderate, characters in the novel.

Objective: To discuss and explore what gender means in the novel, and helping students see how complex this theme really is, even though Okonkwo's view seems very narrow and clear-cut. A larger objective could be to have them relate this discussion to gender roles in their own cultures, and explore why/how things are not always as they seem when it comes to gender relations and assumptions.

Preparatory Reading:

- "Women in Achebe's World: A Womanist Critique" by Rose Ure Mezu (in *Chinua Achebe: The Man and His Works* 2006)
- "Problems of Gender and History in the Teaching of *Things Fall Apart*" by Rhonda Cobham (*Modern Critical Interpretations: Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart*, ed. Harold Bloom 2002)

- “Okonkwo and His Mother: *Things Fall Apart* and Issues of Gender in the Constitution of African Postcolonial Discourse” by Biodun Jeyifo (in *Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart: A Casebook*, ed. Isidore Okpewho 2003)
- “Igbo Women from 1929-1960” by John N. Oriji (*West Africa Review*)
<http://westafricareview.com/vol2.1/oriji.html>
- *Ngambika* (excerpt)

Lecture points: In addition to addressing the ideas listed above, a lecture on gender in the text might include the following:

- Explanation of the difference between sex and gender
- Discussion of what gender means to culture, how language can be “gendered,” and gendered meaning affects the way we see the world
- A reminder that gender roles vary by society and what is “sexist” or inappropriate in one place might be perfectly normal somewhere else. Gender roles are not the same in all places, and based on only the fictional world of *Things Fall Apart*, we can’t really make blanket assessments about “all of Igbo culture” or people
- Provide some background and context for gender roles in Igbo societies (then and now might be nice, but at a minimum at the time of the novel’s setting).
- Masculinity/femininity, the role of a “man” in society – compare and contrast Okonkwo with his father – use this to discuss how (if at all) students have a different view of what it means to be “a real man”
- Gendered meanings (motherland, fatherland; masc/fem words)
- Kinship and extended family. Define matriarchy and patriarchy and what they mean to cultural rules and norms. Ask the class to think of examples of both positive and negative effects of both matriarchal and patriarchal systems. Point out ways in which our own society is structured patriarchally. Ask students to think of other examples.
- Consider showing clips of either the video production of *Things Fall Apart* (see Video Resources in this guide) or of Igbo women and men discussing their roles in society. Have students discuss how this relates to the book, what it means.
- Provide some history and context for what it means to be “feminist” in Africa and how/why terms like “womanism” are preferred. You may consider discussing the debate over feminism as a Western concept, and whether or not there is a universal standard that should apply to all women when it comes to women’s rights and roles in society.
- Discuss the nuances of gender in the text and how gender issues are not just male vs. female in the text. Achebe develops lots of grey area – characters with different views, male characters who “act” female or female characters who “act” male, etc.

Discussion Questions:

- How does Okonkwo's relationship with male and female characters differ? Why?
- What role to women play in this novel? What is life like for Okonkwo's wives?
- Some female characters in the book don't seem to fit the mold according to Okonkwo's view? Who are they and why are they important to the text? (
- What material things can you find in the book that have a specific gender? Does their gender effect their meaning or how they are used? How or how not?
- When Okonkwo is sent into exile, he is sent to Mbanta, his "motherland," where things seem very different than life in Umuofia. How are they different? What do these differences tell us about gender? What do you make of the expression "Mother is Supreme" that is mentioned in the book?
- What do the terms "patriarchy" and "matriarchy" mean? Give one example of each from the text.
- How is Okonkwo's view of gender different from other characters' view of gender roles in the novel? Give examples.
- Think about the character Ezinma. Of Ezinma, Okonkwo thinks: "She should have been a boy" (p. 64). Why is it necessary to the story that Okonkwo's most favored child be a girl? What does it mean that she has all of the characteristics that her father finds more valuable in a son?
- In the novel, there are two kinds of murder – male and female (124). What are these and what do they mean to the novel? Does it matter that Okonkwo committed the "female" kind of murder?

Suggested passages for close reading

- The first paragraph on page 13 that begins "Okonkwo rules his household with a heavy hand..." In this paragraph, we learn about his fear of weakness and how he learns that *agbala* means both "woman" and a man who has no title. Discuss how this effect his attitude and views about gender.
- "Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children... [...] That was the kind of story Nwoye loved. But he now knew that they were for foolish women and children, and he knew that his father wanted him to be a man. And so he feigned that he no longer cared for women's stories..." (53-54) What does this passage tell us about the conflict between father and son? What does it tell us about what gender means in the novel? How does it foreshadow Nwoye's later conversion?
- Women "never saw the inside of the [*egwugwu* house]. No woman ever did. They scrubbed and painted he outside walls under the supervision of men. If they imagined what was inside, they kept their imagination to themselves. No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan" (89). This is a good example of how women and men have different social roles in Igbo society. Discuss this passage and what it means to the novel.
- The discussion of motherland and "mother is supreme" on p. 133-135

- The very important passage in which Okonkwo’s friend Ofoedu discusses the relationship of a well-known couple, Ndulue and Ozoemena, who have both died at the same time. Obierika says “It was always said that Ndulue and Ozoemena had one mind. ..He could not do anything without telling her.” To which Okonkwo replied, “I did not know that. I thought he was a strong man in his youth.” And Ofoedu says, “He was indeed.” (68) This is a key passage as it shows that other esteemed elders in the village do not share Okonkwo’s view that warriors cannot be loving or gentle or close to others; it demonstrates that his rigid position on what constitutes strong masculine behavior is not shared by all Igbo men.

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Okonkwo’s view does not represent the “norm” of Igbo thought in this text; there are many illustrations of how his distorted interpretation of gendered roles is what leads to trouble in his life. Have your students get in groups (or on their own as homework) and find at least three passages in the text where Okonkwo’s view is challenged or contradicted in the novel. Then have them use their list to discuss the larger role gender plays in the novel, and what it means to the story. What is the message that these contradictions reveal?
- **Compare and contrast** the relationships Okonkwo has with his son Nwoye and his daughter, Ezinma.
- Choose one character and write an essay on why gender matters to this person.
- Compare/contrast two characters in a two-page essay which evaluates how gender meaning differs for each of them. Suggested pairs (Okonkwo/Nwoye, Okonkwo/Obierika, Nwoye/Ezinma, Ezinma/Okonkwo).
- Find an advertisement that uses gender roles to describe or promote a product. Do you agree or disagree with the way gender is represented here? Why/why not? Compare the ad to an example in the book where gender is used to explain or describe a specific thing or concept

Suggestions for expanding this unit

This unit could be expanded to discuss gender issues in general, or to go deeper into how the theme plays out in the book. Use the links in the Online Resources section of this guide to find discussion questions and activities specifically related to gender.

Unit 4: Character Studies: Psychology, Relationships and Meaning

7A: Okonkwo: Villain, Victim or Tragic Hero?

7B: Nwoye

7C: Okonkwo and his family: the role of his wives and children

7D: Ezinma - Fathers, sons and daughters: key relationships in the novel

7E: Obierika, Voice of Reason

7F: Outsiders: The role of missionaries and colonial administrators

Character development is central to the development of a wide range of issues in the novel, and one could easily teach the entire book in a six-week session focusing only on characters, and how they relate to family, friendships and identity as they develop the other themes. Okonkwo himself is such a complex character, and most of the other themes in the novel are developed by exploring the relationships between Okonkwo and other characters.

Objective: To perform close readings of specific characters, assess their relationships, and determine how characterization relates to other major themes in the novel to create meaning.

Preparatory Reading:

- “For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika” from *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration* by Biodun Jeyifo

Handout/presentation materials

- **Characters in *Things Fall Apart*** (this list is available online as a handout/reference guide):

Okonkwo protagonist

Unoka his shiftless, title-less father

Okonkwo’s wives: (1) **Nwoye’s mother**, the senior wife

Children: Nwoye [Isaac] (m), Obiageli (f), Nneka, Nwofia (“begotten in the wilderness” 45, should’ve been a boy), and the “adopted son” **Ikemefuna** (m) who is killed by Okonkwo

(2) **Ekwefi**

Child: **Ezinma** (f)

(3) **Ojiugo**

Children: **Nkechi** (f), **Obiageli** (f)

* Note: # of children here incomplete. Text says he has 11 children before the exile; 2 (?) born in exile; 5 sons

Ikemefuna young boy captured in revenge for death of a daughter of Umuofia

Obierika friend of Okonkwo

Ndulue and Ozoemena couple known for their close relationship (68)

Ofoedu Friend of Okonkwo and Obierika

Agbala Oracle of the Hills & the Caves

Chika Priestess of Agbala

Chielo Priestess of Agbala

Ani Earth goddess

Ezeani	Priest of Ani
Uchendu	Okonkwo's mother's brother in Mbanta (exile)
Mr. Kiaga	missionary interpreter/teacher
Mr. Brown	white missionary – compromise and accommodation policy
Mr. Smith	white missionary (Brown's replacement); no compromise policy
Nneka	first convert; mother of twins
Okoli	man "accused"/presumed/rumored to have killed sacred python (dies 114)
Enoch	priest of the snake cult
District Commissioner	Unnamed British colonial administrator who famously appears to pronounce Okonkwo's story "interesting reading" for a paragraph in his memoir: <i>The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger</i>

Lecture points:

- Begin with a discussion of character analysis – what is it, how to do it, how characters work together to create meaning, etc.
- Discuss the role of the PROTAGONIST and minor or supporting characters.
- Discuss Okonkwo's role as protagonist. Is he a hero? A victim? A villain?
- Use passages from the text to explore relationships between characters
 - Okonkwo and Unoka
 - Okonkwo and Obierika
 - Okonkwo and his children
 - Okonkwo's wives and their children
 - etc
- Show how most of the themes in the novel depend on character development to make sense. Use this to demonstrate how novels/fiction work – show how Okonkwo (and the other characters) act out the drama to produce meaning and allow us different points of view to consider as we interpret the novel
- Remind the class that Okonkwo, though esteemed and in a position of authority in his village, is a bit of an anomaly. Others do not share his views on many things.
- You might also consider spending entire days on individual characters to explore how they relate to specific themes/issues
- Nwoye and religion/conversion
- The missionaries vs. the rest of the characters; how do they differ?
- Ezinma and gender roles, Ezinma and Igbo customs/belief
- Ikemefuna and his symbolic death; also what his presence in the novel teaches us about how this society works, its rules and norms

Discussion Questions:

- What is "characterization?" How are characters created in a text?
- What does the term "protagonist" mean? What happens when our protagonist is kind of antagonistic? Is Okonkwo a sympathetic character? How can we relate to him? Does he remind you of anyone you know?

- Do a close reading of the descriptions of Okonkwo and Unoka in chapter one. How do these two characters differ? What kind of language is used to describe each of them? What proverbs are associated with each? What does this contrast foreshadow?
- Discuss specific characters/pairs of characters and what they mean to the rest of the text.
- What is the significance of the child Ikemefuna to the novel? Why does Okonkwo kill him? What can be learned from this episode?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Make a list of characters or character pairs for the students and ask them to write down the major theme or issue associated with that character/pair of characters. Then have them find one example of this, with a quote, to present to the rest of the class. This could be done in groups or as homework.
- Write a one-page character analysis of the character of your choice. Be sure to include: a description of the character, his/her relationship to the protagonist and his/her main function in the novel. Support your response with quotes from the book.
- Compare and contrast Unoka and Okonkwo. Make a chart or graph of all of their differences.
- Have the students get in character and ask them to enact specific parts of the book, or answer questions “in character”
- Think about the character of Nwoye. Why does he convert to Christianity? Write an essay in which you discuss the factors that led to his transformation, and how they relate to his relationship with his father.
- What is a hero? Create a project (essay, story, poem or art project) which answers the question: Is Okonkwo a hero? Be prepared to share your ideas with the class.

Suggestions for expanding this unit

The most obvious way to expand this unit is to focus on one character at a time, and use class time to do close readings of passages related to that character. This activity lends well to group projects which could result in Character Analysis Presentations (which could be as pedantic or as creative as the students wish). This unit could also be expanded by focusing on a different characteristic of Okonkwo each day (his view on women, his role in society, his relationships with other characters, etc) to really explore how complex his character is, and how it is used to develop so many themes in the text.

Unit 5: Power, Knowledge, Education and Religion: “The Center Cannot Hold”

These important minor themes of the novel are what many critics point to as what causes things to fall apart in Umuofia: the “cracks” in Igbo thought that create power differentials and make some more likely than others to covert and/or embrace the changes the Europeans bring to town; the introduction of Christianity and its appeal to those at the lowest end of the social strata; and the power of education in the new system of colonial administration (particularly the use of English and the role of translators). These themes overlap and have various other impacts in the novel, but make a good unit when used to discuss some of the impacts of colonialism in the novel, and the power relations and inequities of Igbo society that make Christianity seem very appealing to many people in Umuofia.

“When the missionaries came, the Africans had the land and the Christians had the Bible. They taught us to pray with our eyes closed.

When we opened them they had the land and we had the Bible”

- Jomo Kenyatta (*in Mazrui 149-150*)

Objective: To perform close readings of passages relating to power, knowledge, education and religion in the novel and explore the ways in which these themes help us understand why “things fall apart” in Umuofia. Students should become aware of how these are interrelated and how both internal and external factors can contribute to the success or failure of individual aims. Students should be able to analyze the title of the novel, and the Yeats poem on which it was based.

“[T]he main purpose of colonial school system was to train Africans to participate in the domination and exploitation of the continent as a whole . . . Colonial education was education for subordination, exploitation, the creation of mental confusion and the development of underdevelopment.” [263]

- Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*

Preparatory Reading:

- “Missionaries and Converts: Religion and Colonial Intrusion in *Things Fall Apart*” by Joseph McLaren (*Modern Critical Interpretations: Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart*, ed. Harold Bloom 2002)
- Excerpt from Walter Rodney: *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*: “[T]he main purpose of colonial school system was to train Africans to participate in the

domination and exploitation of the continent as a whole . . . Colonial education was education for subordination, exploitation, the creation of mental confusion and the development of underdevelopment.” [263]

Handout/presentation materials

- “The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats (online)

Lecture points:

- You might consider beginning this unit with a discussion of the poem “The Second Coming” by W.B. Yeats, from which Achebe drew the title of the novel. Provide some background context for the text (as a response to British control of Ireland) and some background on Yeats. Read the entire poem, and analyze in particular the four lines that preface *Things Fall Apart*:
Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
- Ask the class what they think the poem means, and what it foreshadows in the novel. What is “the center” of this novel? Why can it not hold? What forces are working in the book that prevent the “falconer” from hearing the “falcon”? What do these symbols translate to in the novel?
- Ideally, this discussion will generate ideas about the various power factors that impact the major events in the novel: Igbo law and custom, outside penetration and imposition of new rules, religion and educational systems, and Okonkwo’s own power struggle and battle with his *chi*.
- Discuss how religion and education relate to power in the text.

Discussion Questions:

- Discuss the religious significance of the W.B. Yeats poem, “The Second Coming” and what it means to the novel
- What is “the center” of this novel? Why can it not hold? What forces are working in the book that prevent the “falconer” from hearing the “falcon”? What do these symbols translate to in the novel?
- How do the missionaries set the stage for colonial control? Who are the first converts, and why do these people find Christianity so appealing?
- What is Okonkwo’s view on the missionaries? On colonial education? How does his view differ from other characters’ views?

Suggested passages for close reading:

- Conversion of the *osu* (156-157) and the killing of royal python (157-159)
- The prophetic words of “one of the oldest members of the *umunna*” (166-167), in which he says: “I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the

bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers.”

- Obierika’s big speech:
“[The white man] does not even speak our tongue[.] But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (176)
- Chapter 21 (178-183), a short chapter on Mr. Brown, who “came to be respected even by the clan, because he trod softly on its faith” (178), and how “from the very beginning education and religion went hand in hand” (182).
- Contrast the description of Brown’s methods with this description of his successor, Rev. Smith: “He openly condemned Mr. Brown’s policy of compromise and accommodation. He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in a mortal conflict with the sons of darkness. He spoke in his sermons about sheep and goats and about wheat and tares. He belived in slaying the prophets of Baal.” What does this passage say about the relationship between power, control and religion?
- The scene where Enoch, a Christian convert, unmaskes an egwugwu during a public performance (186-187)

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Write an essay in which you compare and contrast Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith.
- Why do some people convert to Christianity in the book and others do not? Use evidence to support your view, and write an essay in which you demonstrate which side is more convincing.
- Prepare group presentations which explain the meaning of the book’s title.
- What causes things to fall apart in this novel? Stage a debate in which students are assigned various positions on this topic, and answer “in character,” using evidence/quotes from the text to support their views.

Suggestions for expanding this unit

If you have time, a slightly dated but excellent film on the topic of the relationship between religion, education and colonialism is Basil Davidson’s “**The Bible and the Gun**”, Part 5 the Africa: A Voyage of Discovery series. This video is available for (free) loan through the UW African Studies Program, and is also available at many libraries. See a summary of the documentary here:

<http://dickinsg.intrasun.tcnj.edu/films/basil/video5.html>

Unit 6: Destiny and the role of *chi* in the novel

Destiny, the role of one's *chi*, and the struggle of the individual within society are major issues throughout the novel. One could argue that Okonkwo's central conflict lies in his constant struggle to understand and make sense of his own lot in life – which he variously sees as inevitable or something he can manipulate. By the end of the novel, the significance of this theme becomes very clear as we're forced to ask if Okonkwo was a success or failure. Did he defy his *chi*? Was he powerless to control a natural progression of events? And is the concept of *chi* to be taken literally, or metaphorically? What does Okonkwo's destiny signify for the theme of colonialism? Is it symbolic? If so, of what?

Objective: To encourage students to read beyond the linear plot of the novel to see a larger theme at work: a man trying to come to terms with his lot in life, and accept the ways his personal god, or *chi*, to control his destiny, while at the same time struggling to change his world. This theme could also be used to generate larger discussion of how literature tackles such metaphysical concerns, and how they usually have elements of both cultural specificity and universality.

Preparatory Reading:

- 'When a Man Fails Alone': A Man and His *Chi* in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" by Harold Scheub (in *Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: A Casebook*, ed. Isidore Okpewho 2003)

Handout/presentation materials

Lecture points:

- Define *chi* as a cultural concept.
- Discuss how *chi* relates to the ideas of "destiny" and "fate"
- Propose a model or strategy for discussing this theme in the book by asking the starting question, "Is Okonkwo responsible for his fate in this text, or is it determined by outside forces?"
- Be sure to raise the question of belief. Is *chi* a concept we should accept at face value as a matter of cultural/religious belief? Is it a metaphor? A literary device? What do we learn from the exposition of this theme throughout the novel?

Discussion Questions:

- Is Okonkwo at odds with, or at peace with, his *chi*? Support your answer with examples from the novel.
- There seem to be conflicting ideas about how *chi* works in the novel. One proverb says: "If a man says yes, his *chi* says yes also" (27, 131), indicating that people can have some influence over their own fate. Other passages suggest that one has no control over the decision of the *chi* (79, eg) and that "a man could not rise beyond

the destiny of his *chi*" (131). Okonkwo himself seems to struggle with this question. Which do you think is the dominant, or correct view in the novel?

- Think about the ending of the novel, and Okonkwo's death. In the end, after all his efforts to be the opposite of his father, he dies a very similarly shameful death. What does this ending mean to the larger theme of destiny? Was this the inevitable end determined by Okonkwo's *chi*?

Suggested passages for close reading:

- 152-153: The scene where Nwoye joins the church and Okonkwo reflects on how he was "cursed with such a son" and sees the answer in "the finger of his personal god or *chi*. For who else could he explain his great misfortune and exile and now his son's despicable behavior?" This passage ends with the proverb "Living fire begets cold, impotent ash" and a comparison of the "effeminate" and "degenerate" Nwoye to Unoka. Use this to discuss and debate Okonkwo's "true" destiny.
- The second paragraph on page 131 on the role of the *chi* and Okonkwo's desire to become a community leader.

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- "Determine your fate" contest. Put students in groups and award prizes, mete out consequences and otherwise make them "choose" their own destiny based on who is the first (and last) to answer questions, solve problems or come up with discussion points. Some ideas
 - Find as many passages as you can that refer to *chi* in the book
 - Proverb interpretation contest. The first group to come up with an accurate description of what a proverb means wins.
- Write an essay in which you answer the question "Who or what is responsible for Okonkwo's fate?" Support your essay with quotes from the novel.

Suggestions for expanding this unit

Teachers particularly interested in this theme might consider making it a unifying theme for their courses, as they look at other texts, issues or units. The question of the relationship of the individual to the community, and to the universe at large, is central to many works, so it wouldn't be difficult to make connections and use those to engage students in on-going thematic projects or comparison/contrast studies.

Unit 7: Language and Style

7A: Form and content

7B: The significance of proverbs and other forms of orality in the novel

7C: Symbolism and Imagery in the Novel

Objective: Students will learn to discuss, understand and appreciate the literary merits of the text by talking about its form, language and style, and analyzing specific uses of imagery, intertextuality, symbols and metaphors.

Preparatory Reading:

- “Realism, Criticism, and the Disguises of Both: A Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* with an Evaluation of the Criticism Relating to It” by Ato Quayson (*Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Winter, 1994), pp. 117-136)
- “The Palm-Oil with which Achebe’s Words are Eaten” by Bernth Lindfors
- “Chinua Achebe: The Art of Fiction” (interview)
http://www.theparisreview.com/media/1720_ACHEBE.pdf

Handout/presentation materials

- You might make use of this list of proverbs found in *Things Fall Apart*, which includes discussion questions: <http://www.unc.edu/~hhalpin/ThingsFallApart/Proverbs.html>

Lecture points:

- Define any literary terms unfamiliar to your students
- Discuss “realist fiction” and how it differs from strictly “historical fiction”
- Discuss the difference between fiction and non-fiction
- Explain the difference between form (*how* the text is put together) and content (*what* the text says, the story)
- Language use and Orality – elements of oral culture in the text
- Internal Glossing (“his personal god or *chi*”) and the glossary at the back of the book
- Intertextuality: define, and demonstrate how Achebe incorporates lots of other “texts” into his work (Conrad, Yeats, oral stories, proverbs, etc). Discuss how this works and what it means
- Symbolism and imagery: using examples of your choice, discuss how to identify a symbol or motif (recurring image), and how to determine what they mean
- Literary interpretation vs “opinion” or “personal reaction”
- Using textual evidence to support interpretations

Discussion Questions:

- Think about language and translation. Why does Achebe include so many Igbo words? Why does he provide “translations” for them? What does this say about his intended or assumed audience?
 - Why do you think Achebe uses the old-fashioned, outdated spelling “Ibo” instead of the more common and contemporary spelling “Igbo”?
 - Fire and drumming are two important symbols in the novel. Choose one of these and find 3 examples of where it is discussed in the book. Use these examples to interpret the meaning of that symbol.
 - The following questions on “Structure, Technique and Plot” are taken from the Random House teacher’s guide for *Things Fall Apart*
<http://www.randomhouse.com/acmart/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780385474542&view=tg>
1. The novel is structured in three parts. What do the divisions reflect about the stages of life of the protagonist? How do the divisions move toward and illustrate the collapse of Igbo society?
 2. What is the point of view of the narrator? How does the point of view contribute to our understanding of the conflicting cultures? What techniques does the narrator use to evoke a participatory role for the reader?
 3. In the novel's opening, Okonkwo is wrestling. How does this contrast with the ending, when Okonkwo is deliberating about an adequate response to the British humiliation of the Igbo elders in jail?
 4. Achebe uses storytelling flashbacks to describe the relationship of Okonkwo and Unoka. What do the flashbacks reveal about their relationship? What is the effect of the use of storytelling to illustrate the flashbacks?
 5. In Chapter One, how does Achebe foreshadow the presence (and ultimate fate) of Ikemefuna?
 6. Describe the judicial function of the egwugwu and its relationship to the living, particularly to Igbo women. Why is it also related to the spiritual world? How does Achebe illustrate the blending of the spiritual and real worlds?
 7. How does the killing of Ikemefuna foreshadow the fall of Okonkwo?
 8. Why is Okonkwo exiled? Why is the exile ironic? Compare to Okonkwo's participation in the killing of Ikemefuna and its lack of consequences.
 9. When and how is the white man introduced? Trace the chronology of the Igbo people's responses to the arrival and settlement of the white man. What attitudes toward the Igbo people do the white men bring and how do their attitudes determine their treatment of the Igbo people?

10. How does Achebe use incidents to paint the general character of the white colonizers?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Select a proverb from the novel and write a one-page paper explaining what it means, and why it is important to the text.
- Make a poster which provides “Word Map” of Igbo terms, with references to and quotes from the text. Give a presentation in which you describe why each term is significant to the text.
- Write a letter to Chinua Achebe listing at least 3 specific things you enjoyed about the style or form of his book, explaining why they appealed to you.
- Foreshadowing is an important feature in the book, and one that’s used often. In groups, find 2-3 instances of foreshadowing and discuss how they comment on the events they foreshadow.
- Think about the “orality” of the novel. List three examples of how Achebe brings features of oral traditions into his novel, and write a paragraph for each example, explaining why it is evidence of orality.

Suggestions for expanding this unit

If you haven’t already discussed it, the language debate would be a good addition to this unit (see “Suggestions for expanding this unit” in Unit 2 for details). You could use this debate to continue your discussions of the role language plays in the novel, and the interrelationship between English and Igbo terms.

Another option for expanding this unit, particularly in English courses, would be to look closely at the form and structure of the novel. How are each of the three parts composed? How does Achebe manage to both put forward a linear storyline while making use of a relatively non-linear mode of expression?

Unit 8: Colonial Impacts and Postcolonial Considerations

"Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse--to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement"

- Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," *Hopes and Impediments*

Objective: To explore and understand the theme of colonial impacts in the novel, the role of the British influences in the text, and how these are understood in relation to the other major themes in the novel. Students should be able to identify passages which directly confront or attempt to disprove/undo the negative stereotypes of African reality associated with colonial misrepresentation of Africa. This unit should expand on the historical section covered earlier, and look at colonialism as a *theme* in the novel, as well as the way Achebe uses his novel to address and respond to Eurocentric versions of African history.

Preparatory Reading:

- Review Materials for Unit 1 on history and colonialism
- *Reading Chinua Achebe: "Nation Formation and the Novel"* by Simon Gikandi
- "Writing, Culture and Domination" by Simon Gikandi in *Reading Chinua Achebe*
- Kipling's Imperialism (on Victorian web):
<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/kipling/rkimperialism.html>

Handout/presentation materials

- Colonial Narratives handout: Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden" and/or "Gunga Din" with Pear's Soap advertisement

Lecture points:

- Define Eurocentrism and its relation to colonial/imperial depictions of the colonies in the 19th century
- Provide background for Rudyard Kipling, Britain's Imperial poet, and analyze the poems "The White Man's Burden" and/or "Gunga Din"
- You may wish to provide other examples of colonial art, advertising or literature which depicts Africa in similarly stereotypical, unrealistic and ahistorical ways
- Discuss Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the impact it had on Achebe's work, and European views about Africa.
- "The sun never sets on the British Empire": stress that the main purpose of colonization is economic

- Discuss how the book responds to, negates, debates or challenges Eurocentric assumptions.
- Pose the question: who is the intended audience of this book? Do you see Achebe as a reviser of history or as a “native informant”?

Discussion Questions:

- Compare and contrast Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith. What do these characters represent? What do you make of their names?
- What is the role of the missionaries in the novel?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of colonial education?
- Who is the District Commissioner? What is his role? What does he represent in this novel?
- Achebe wrote his novel in 1958, just before Nigeria’s independence. Why do you think he set the novel in the 1890s? What does this allow him to say about colonialism that he might not have said had his text been set in the present?
- Why does Okonkwo kill the court messenger?
- What are the consequences of Okonkwo’s murder?
- How do you interpret Okonkwo’s suicide? Why did he do it?

Suggested passages for close reading:

- Chapter 23 (192-197) describes the futile attempt of the leaders of Umuofia to negotiate with the District Commissioner at his headquarters, and the arrest of Okonkwo and 5 others. The District Commissioner says: “We shall not do you any harm...if only you agree to cooperate with us. We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy...” then describes the new “justice” which is to be meted out under the authority of his “great queen...the most powerful ruler in the world.” Do a close reading of this passage, considering what assumptions the District Commissioner is making, and how the men might take offense at his suggestion that they do not have justice under their own authority, etc. Point out lines in the speech that seem condescending or insulting and discuss.
- Analyze the climactic point of the novel: Okonkwo’s murder of the court messenger (204-205). The last two paragraphs of this chapter reflect Okonkwo’s thoughts and actions immediate after killing the man; interpret those paragraphs.
- Read and discuss the novel’s closing, Chapter 25 (206-209).

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Create a timeline of European contact with Africa. Where does *Things Fall Apart* fall into this timeline?
- Think about the expression “The sun never sets on the British empire.” Write a letter to Queen Victoria from the perspective of Okonkwo, telling her how you feel about her empire. OR: Write a letter to Okonkwo from Queen Victoria’s perspective, trying to persuade him of the advantages of colonialism.

- Do a character analysis of the District Commissioner. What does he symbolize in the novel?
- Make a list of all the things the District Commissioner and Okonkwo have in common. How do they differ?

Suggestions for expanding this unit

The film, *Keita: Heritage of a Griot*, also explores the impact of colonialism on “tradition” in Africa. Set in Guinea, it looks at French colonial education and government in terms of its lasting impact on modern life. Like *Things Fall Apart*, it is a contemporary film that is set in the past, but also includes a modern element as we see the griot, Djeliba, telling the story of the epic hero of ancient Mali, Sundiata, to Mabo, a young school boy. This would be a good companion film for this unit, and broaden your discussion of the impact of colonialism in Africa, as well as allow you to discuss the differences between British and French colonial policies, governance, etc. The 94-minute film, which is subtitled, can be borrowed from the African Studies Program. <http://newsreel.org/nav/title.asp?tc=CN0050>

Unit 9: *Things Fall Apart* as tragedy

Sub-themes: **Conformity vs. individuality**
Tradition vs. Modernity
Action vs. Inaction

There's no doubt that *Things Fall Apart* has a tragic ending: our brave protagonist is dead, humiliated and ultimately unsuccessful. His community has ignored his warnings. His deeds, which he hoped would cause action and generate resistance, were futile. He becomes a joke: laughable fodder for a paragraph of material in the District Commissioner's memoir. However, there are many ways to interpret his death – ranging from the fatalistic (it's a symbol of impending loss of cultural and political autonomy) to liberating (it's a symbol of the undying spirit of independence inherent in the Igbo worldview). In this unit, you can talk about the literary aspects of the novel that make it a tragedy, and what the tragic death of Okonkwo means to the other themes you've covered in class. Did Okonkwo die in vain? What can we learn from his death? What does his death signify for the future of Umuofia? Is it a symbol? Of what?

You may find it helpful to discuss this tragedy in terms of two of the basic sets of conflicts that are developed throughout the novel: **conformity vs. individuality** and **tradition vs. modernity** (or preserving the status quo/going with the flow vs. change and transformation) and **action vs. inaction**.

Objective: To learn what constitutes a tragedy, and deliberate on the meaning of the end of the novel, and what Okonkwo's death means to the larger themes and issues.

Preparatory Reading:

- "The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe" by Abiola Irele (*Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, ed. C.L. Innes and B. Lindfors 1978)
- "Chinua Achebe and the Possibility of Modern Tragedy" by Alastair Niven (*Chinua Achebe: A Celebration*, ed. Peterson and Rutherford)

Handout/presentation materials

- Features of Tragedy (online)

Lecture points:

- Define tragedy
- Discuss the literary indicators of tragedy in the novel
- Initiate a discussion on the meaning of Okonkwo's death and what it symbolizes. Allow the students room to develop their own interpretations of his death: do they see it as positive or negative? Why?

- Since this is likely the final unit on the text, you might consider using it to let the students showcase their close reading skills by asking them to do an in-class project which uses textual evidence to support an interpretation. Let the class decide together on a focus question (What does Okonkwo’s death mean? Why do things fall apart? Who/what is to blame for Okonkwo’s death? Does Okonkwo die a hero or a victim? Etc) and then get into groups to create a presentation, project or essay that answers the question.

Discussion Questions:

- Why is Okonkwo’s death “tragic”?
- What is the general feeling you get at the end of the novel? Have things fallen completely apart? Is there hope for Umuofia? Do you feel sad or relieved that Okonkwo has died?
- Do you think this book is a positive or negative assessment of the colonial encounter? Defend your answer with quotes from the text.
- Why does Achebe let the District Commissioner have the last word in his novel? What does this tell us?
- Reflect on the nature of Okonkwo’s death and the irony of his being “buried like a dog.” What do you make of this sad ending?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Compare *Things Fall Apart* to other tragic stories (perhaps a film). Prepare an oral presentation to summarize your comparison.
- Write an essay in which you explain why Okonkwo is a “tragic hero.”
- Do you think Okonkwo dies in vain? Why or why not? Discuss in groups or as a take-home essay.

Suggestions for expanding this unit

This unit could easily be developed by spending more time on the sub-themes outlined above, and asking students to work either individually or in groups to find evidence of, and analyze how they work in the text.

***Things Fall Apart* in Wisconsin Project Ideas for the Spring Student Conference**

Our *Great Texts* series closes with a Student Conference, to be held in Spring 2010 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, in which students present projects which demonstrate their engagement with and understanding of the text by producing projects of every sort. Productive projects combine imagination and intellect and are multi-faceted and multi-layers. They are serious and academic as well as creative and inventive, and should be viewed as a chance to demonstrate publically the “final” product of all your classroom and individual efforts.

The grid below features some suggestions to get you thinking about possibilities for the spring projects, either with a group or individually. These are just ideas to get you thinking – you might consider combining suggestions from different boxes, or come up with an idea all your own.

Whatever style of presentation you choose, your presentation should demonstrate critical reflection on, and interpretation of, *Things Fall Apart*. You might consider exploring a theme, image or character. You might think about the effect of some literary aspect of the novel. Whatever you choose, you should be able to articulate the connection between your project and the book that is meaningful to you. Be creative with this project and express your own unique point of view!

Art Painting Sculpture Drawing Mixed Media	Music and Drama Composition CD compilation Musical/song performance Mini opera or musical Play or sketch performance	Web Podcast Website Blog Interactive map (Flash)
Creative Writing Poetry Collection Travel Diary or Reading Journal Children’s Book Graphic novel/comic	Academic Writing Literary Analysis Speech Close Reading Essay	Print Journalism Interview Magazine article Newspaper Travel guide Yearbook
Broadcast Journalism Investigative Interview or profile News broadcast	Movies, TV, Radio TV talk show Scene from a film Radio program	Other Diaspora Project Illustrated family tree Puzzle Diagram Research Project

ACHEBE ONLINE:

Recommended Web Resources, Teaching Materials and Study Guides

On the author:

Chinua Achebe - Swiss Educ Profile

http://www.swisseduc.ch/english/readinglist/achebe_chinua/

Biographical information as well as links to articles about Achebe and his work, and links to some great online video and audio interviews and lectures by Achebe.

Chinua Achebe on Postcolonial Web

<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/achebe/achebeov.html>

Chinua Achebe Profile by Cora Agatucci

<http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/achebe.htm>

Stanford University's African Writers resource page

<http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg/africa/lit.html>

This site has several good links to info and articles on Achebe, but scroll down for more general resources on African literature as well. A good one-stop-shopping site for African lit.

On the text:

Things Fall Apart - Swiss Educ Teaching Resources

http://www.swisseduc.ch/english/readinglist/achebe_chinua/things/index.html

The *Things Fall Apart* page contains links to supplementary materials, including several helpful essays on major themes in the novel.

Talking About 'Tribe'" Africa Action

<http://www.africaaction.org/bp/ethall.htm>

EDSITEment lessons.

In the two lessons below (each designed to take four class periods), you'll find detailed plans for teaching the book from either a literary or historical perspective, and you could easily do both or mix & match if you have enough time. Each lesson contains guiding questions, objectives, preparation guide, lesson activities and suggestions for extending the unit. Also includes many useful links to background info, maps, and other material to help teach and contextualize the novel.

Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: Oral and Literary Strategies

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=343

Excellent, detailed lesson plan based on an examination of the novel in terms of its literary merits and use of orality

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: Teaching Through the Novel

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=382

Guiding Questions: How does Achebe see the role of the writer/storyteller? In what ways does he use fiction as a means of expressing and commenting on history? To what extent is *Things Fall Apart* successful in communicating an alternative narrative to the dominant Western history of missionaries in Africa and other colonized societies?

Web English Teacher

<http://www.webenglishteacher.com/achebe.html>

Excellent compilation of resources, links and background info. Many of the links take De you to lesson plans and other classroom activities.

Study Guide by Paul Briens, Washington State University (1994/2005)

This excellent study guide includes chapter-by-chapter suggestions for discussion questions.

<http://www.wsu.edu/~briens/anglophone/achebe.html>

Study Guide with Reading Questions, by Cora Agatucci

<http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/achebtfa.htm>

Study/Discussion Question from the 2005 Cornell Reading Project

http://reading.cornell.edu/reading_project_05/study.html

1. Traditional societies are often thought to be generally free of internal conflicts about values, and to be fixed and essentially unchanging over time. What aspects of the society depicted in *Things Fall Apart* might resist those assumptions?
2. When Europeans arrive in Okonkwo's village, one result is a new kind of government and a new kind of law. How do the new legal and governmental practices and institutions differ from those that preceded them? Are the changes good, bad, or something more complicated, and why?
3. Okonkwo's self-understanding is deeply bound up with his need to affirm and protect what he thinks of as his "manliness." What are the main features of Okonkwo's view of masculinity, and how does his view relate to that of other important characters in the novel?
4. What should we make of the role of women in the novel? Are the female characters just dispensable appendages of the male characters in the story?
5. Stories and storytelling play a central role in the novel. What are some of the most important aspects of that role, for instance, in the preservation of social customs, and the shaping of individual identities?

6. Okonkwo's friend Obierika is described as "a man who thought about things" (p. 125). What does Obierika think about, and how does that reflection ultimately put him at odds with Okonkwo?
7. An epic hero, like Odysseus, is typically set apart from other characters by his capacity to endure many trials and tests. A tragic hero, like Hamlet or Oedipus, is typically a man of consequence brought down by an insuperable conflict, or through his own weakness. Is Okonkwo an epic hero, a tragic hero, or is he a hero at all?
8. It is said of Okonkwo at one point that "Clearly his personal god or chi was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his chi. The saying of the elders was not true—that if a man said yea his chi also affirmed. Here was a man whose chi said nay despite his own affirmation." (p. 131). How should we understand the roles of fate and individual responsibility in the novel in light of the role that the Ibo notion of chi plays throughout the story?
9. In *English and the African Writer*, Achebe writes that his work represents "a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language." What features of the novel embody this ambition? Do they help or hinder Achebe's attempt to make the world depicted in the novel accessible to a broad audience?
10. An important assumption in the novel is the close connection between an individual's action and the communal fate of all. Okonkwo is told by the priest of the earth goddess, Ani, "The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan." (p. 30) Does this explain why, strong willed as he is, Okonkwo accepts without question the communal sanctions prescribed for his misdeeds?

Page numbers cited here are from the Cornell University Edition of *Things Fall Apart*.

Village of Umuofia Interactive Learning Project

<http://www.literaryworlds.wmich.edu/umuofia/>

The Village of Umuofia is a virtual reality space enhancing the study of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* and the Igbo people at time of British colonial domination of Nigeria. Participants may use this environment in a variety of ways, including as an immersive museum of images of Igbo village life and traditional West African music, as well as an interactive space for live action role play activities based on the novel.

Delaware Community College 2006-2007 "One –Book One-College"

Featured Book page

<http://www.dccc.edu/library/thingsfallapart.html>

Spark Notes guide to Things Fall Apart

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/things/>

A decent, if over simplified guide to the book, with discussion questions and a quiz that could be used to make sure students are reading. You might want to be familiar with this site if you plan on assigning take-home essays; it's full of plagiarizable material.

TeachIt UK

<http://www.teachit.co.uk/index.asp?CurrMenu=searchresults&tag=226>

Study guides, handouts, lesson plans, a character tree and other materials. Must create a (free) account to access materials.

California's SCORE project Teachers' Guide:

<http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/things/thingstg.html>

A very detailed guide with many projects, lessons and assignments.

Random House Teachers' Guide

<http://www.randomhouse.com/acmart/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780385474542&view=tg>

Language Is Power: How Language Is Used to Transmit the Values of African Authenticity, by Lorena Amos, Westinghouse High School.

Language-based thematic approach which could be useful when teaching the novel or a larger unit on language issues. Designed specifically for African-American students, but could be tailored to suit any classroom.

http://www.chatham.edu/PTI/Diversity_Resistance/Amos_01.htm

Things Fall Apart Vocabulary List

Includes quiz and list of words in the novel commonly appearing on SAT exams.

<https://secure.layingthefoundation.org/english/vocab/novels/Things%20Fall%20Apart.pdf>



General Online Resources for African Literature

African Writers: Voices of Change

<http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/cm/africana/writers.htm>

Links to many websites about African literature and specific writers

African Writer.com

<http://www.africanwriter.com/>

Stories by, and articles about, contemporary African writers

African Writing Online

<http://www.african-writing.com/seven/>

African Literature Association

<http://www.africanlit.org/>

Premiere professional organization in African Literature, and publishers of *Research in African Literature*

H-Net Africa's Literature and Cinema forum

<http://www.h-net.org/~aflitweb/>

Callaloo

<http://callaloo.tamu.edu/>

Leading academic journal of African Diaspora arts and letters

Columbia University's compilation of African literature on the web links

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/africa/cuvl/aflit.html>

African History resources online

Stanford University:

<http://library.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg/africa/history.html>

Issues in African History by James Giblin

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/toc/history/giblinhistory.html>

Films, Videos and Interviews

General Resources:

The **UW-Madison's African Studies Program** has films, books and artifacts available for loan, and can even help arrange for a guest speaker or storyteller on any variety of Africa-related topics – for free! See the film catalogue at <http://africa.wisc.edu/outreach/catalogue.pdf>, or contact the Outreach Coordinator at outreach@africa.wisc.edu. Outreach homepage: <http://africa.wisc.edu/outreach/index.htm>

Things Fall Apart – 1987 Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation mini-series. Various episodes are available on VHS from selected libraries (including the UW system), or you could screen clips from YouTube, which has about 60 installments of the 13 episodes. MEDIAFRIC Production. Find scene 1 at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7FS95lcRNU>

Videos available through the UW System include:

- **Chinua Achebe with Nuruddin Farah** [videorecording] / presented by ICA Video in conjunction with Trilion (1984). Writers in Conversation series.
- ***Things fall apart. Episode 8, Relief*** videorecording / [presented by] Nigerian Television Authority ; adapted and scripted for TV by Adiola Onyedibia. VHS
- **Chinua Achebe** (lecture video). Distinguished lecture series (University of Wisconsin--Madison. Wisconsin Union). VHS. Lecture; presented at the Memorial Union, University of Wisconsin--Madison, November 12, 1992.
- ***Chinua Achebe: African literature as celebration*** / RM Associates ; edited and presented by Melvyn Bragg. Publisher: Princeton, N.J. : Films for the Humanities & Sciences, c2000.
- ***Chinua Achebe: Africa's voice*** / a directed by David Akinde. Publisher: Princeton, N.J. : Films for the Humanities & Sciences, [2002/2004]. Analyzes the impact Achebe and his writings have had on world literature, as well as his influence as an editor and a spokesman for a generation of African writers. Achebe, Abiola Irele, Gerald Graff, and Charles Larson discuss the characterization, social implications, and levels of interpretation of *Things Fall Apart*. Vital concepts indigenous to the Ibos of southeastern Nigeria are also presented.

Chinua Achebe: Interviews, Lectures and Talks

There are *loads* of interviews, lectures and talks with Achebe and about *Things Fall Apart* readily available online, on YouTube and elsewhere. A couple of note:

- **An Evening with Chinua Achebe** - Library of Congress, May 11, 2009
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5OAJnG6rKo&feature=player_embedded
Note: Achebe himself begins speaking at 15:45 and really starts his talk around 20:50. You may want to skip the lengthy introductions and preliminary remarks.
- **Sept. 15, 2005 talk at Cornell University**. Real Player video available at:
http://reading.cornell.edu/reading_project_05/achebe_visit.htm
- **BBC: "A Hero Returns" 2009** (two parts; features Achebe's celebrated return to Nigeria on the 50th anniversary of *Things Fall Apart*)
Part 1:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjtXPw7c5Jc&feature=PlayList&p=9DA93F29D4D9508C&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=7
Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ON7-G0XqJrc&feature=related>



Books and Articles: A brief review

Recommended Overviews and Teaching Guides:

Approaches to Teaching Things Fall Apart. Ed. Bernth Lindfors (New York: MLA, 1991).

A widely-used teachers' guide that contains a wealth of background information, and excellent scholarly assessments of teaching the author, context and approaches to the text. Many of the essays are aimed at teaching the novel at the college level, but are appropriate for high school as well.

PART 1: MATERIALS, Bernth Lindfors

Editions

Reference Works

Bibliographies

Biographical Sources and Interviews

Igbo Studies

Readings for Students and Teachers

Background Studies: Anthropology, History, Politics, Religion

Critical Commentary

Audiovisual Aids

The Story

The Author

PART 2: APPROACHES

Introduction

The Author as Teacher

Teaching *Things Fall Apart*, *Chinua Achebe*

Teaching the Author

Chinua Achebe and the Signs of the Times, *Simon Gikandi*

Following the Author in *Things Fall Apart*, *Emmanuel Obiechina*

Teaching Context

Things Fall Apart in Its Time and Place, *Robert M. Wren*

The Igbo as Exceptional Colonial Subjects: Fictionalizing an Abnormal Historical Situation, *Dan Izevbaye*

Teaching Texture

The Politics of Point of View: Teaching *Things Fall Apart*, *Ashton Nichols*

The Paradoxical Characterization of Okonkwo, *Arlene A. Elder*

Traditional Paradigms and Modern Intertextuality

Matrical Approach to *Things Fall Apart*: A Poetics of Epic and Mythic Paradigms, *Ousseynou B. Traoré*

"The Tortoise and the Birds": Strategies of Resistance in *Things Fall Apart*, *Barbara Harlow*

Things Fall Apart and the Literature of Empire, *Hunt Hawkins*
The Third World Novel as Counterhistory: *Things Fall Apart* and
Asturias's *Men of Maize*, *Edna Aizenberg*

Challenging Approaches

Making Men and History: Achebe and the Politics of Revisionism
Rhonda Cobham

The Postcolonial African Novel and the Dialogic Imagination,
Zohreh T. Sullivan

Narrative, Metacommentary, and Politics in a "Simple" Story,
Wahneema Lubiano

The Problem of Realism in *Things Fall Apart*: A Marxist Exegesis,
Biodun Jeyifo

Specific Courses

Teaching *Things Fall Apart* in the Humanities Core Course, *Eric Sellin*

Teaching *Things Fall Apart* in a Criticism Course, *Richard K. Priebe*

Chinua Achebe: *The Man and His Works*. Rose Ure Mezu (London: Adonis & Abbey, 2006). This study of Achebe and his major works includes chapters on individual novels, personal interviews with the author, and Mezu's own important essay "Women in Achebe's World: A Womanist Critique." Mezu's assertion is that women have little "voice" in Achebe's work, even though they do at times take powerful action or demonstrate autonomy, particularly in *Things Fall Apart*, which has been criticized for its characterization of women.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Modern Critical Interpretations series. (Chelsea House: 2002). An anthology of contemporary essays on *Things Fall Apart*.

"Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." Martin A. Klein (in *African Novels in the Classroom*. Ed. Margaret Jean Hay. Boulder and London: Lynne Reiner, 2000 25-35).

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. David Whittaker and Mpalive-Hangson Msiska. (London: Routledge, 2007)

A very useful handbook for educators who want to learn more about the cultural context and critical impact of the novel, with an excellent "Critical History" section and extracts from five widely-cited critical readings of the texts by major scholars. Begins with a "Texts and Contexts" chapter that covers both the literary and cultural contexts of the novel much more thoroughly than many of the other guides.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart: A Casebook*, Ed. Isidore Okpewho. (Oxford UP: 2003).

A collection of essays by scholars and an essay by and interview with Achebe himself, covering major themes of the novel, including: language, culture, the role of the *chi*, gender, history, and a particularly useful essay by Ato Quayson: “Realism, Criticism, and the Disguises of Both: A Reading of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* with an Evaluation of the Criticism Relating to It.” In this essay, Quayson highlights the critical tendency to take for granted the novel’s ability to stand as “realism” and how this leads to over-simplified analysis of the novel and its complexities, particularly in terms of the way Achebe critiques and comments on the culture represented in the novel.

“Chinua Achebe and *Things Fall Apart*.” Sara Talis O’Brien. Chapter 1 of *A Teacher’s Guide to African Narratives* (Heinemann:1998. 7-20).

Includes brief discussions of the plot, literary technique and “points to ponder,” which address specific themes and issues in the book (largely anthropologically) and concludes with a synopsis of Achebe’s life and work. A useful survey that could be used as assigned reading for juniors and seniors.

Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe. Ed. **C. L. Innes** and **Bernth Lindfors** (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents, 1978). An early critical anthology by major scholars in African literature, this volume has several still-relevant essays on Achebe’s work, most notably, “The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe” by Abiola Irele and “The Palm-oil with Which Achebe’s Words are Eaten” by Bernth Lindfors, which discusses the centrality of Ibo proverbs to Achebe’s narratives. The section on *Things Fall Apart* includes chapters on Yeats and Achebe, narrative technique, language and symbolism in the novel.

Interventions International Journal of Postcolonial Studies, Volume 11 Issue 2 2009. Special issue on *Things Fall Apart* edited by **Lahoucine Ouzgane** and **Onookome Okome**

Contents: <http://tinyurl.com/njvuzg>

INTRODUCTION

- ENCOUNTERS AND ENGAGEMENTS WITH THINGS FALL APART
Authors: Lahoucine Ouzgane; Onookome Okome

ARTICLES

- ACHEBE AND HIS INFLUENCE IN SOME CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN WRITING
Author: Elleke Boehmer
- IN TRIBUTE TO THINGS FALL APART
Author: Kenneth W. Harrow
- LITERACIES OF VIOLENCE AFTER THINGS FALL APART
Author: Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi
- THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THINGS FALL APART TO AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY
Author: Harry Nii Koney Odamtten
- THINGS FALL APART IN HISTORY

- Author: Neil ten Kortenaar
THINGS FALL APART
Author: Mpalive-Hangson Msiska
 - THE MANY VOICES OF THINGS FALL APART
Author: Hilary Dannenberg
 - READING, TASTE AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES
Author: James Procter
 - THINGS FALL APART AND ACHEBE'S SEARCH FOR MANHOOD
Author: Roselyne M. Jua
 - CONJUNCTURE, HYPERMASCULINITY AND DISAVOWAL IN THINGS FALL APART
Author: Íde Corley
- SITUATIONS
- COLONIAL TO POSTCOLONIAL ETHICS
Author: Stephanie Jones
 - DECOLONIZING GLOBAL THEORIES TODAY
Author: Malini Johar Schueller

Reading Chinua Achebe: Language and Ideology in Fiction. Simon Gikandi (London: James Currey 1991).

“Things Fall Apart and No Longer at Ease.” Gunner, Elizabeth. In *A Handbook for Teaching African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1984. 45-55)

Understanding Things Fall Apart: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources and Historical Documents. Kalu Ogbaa (Westport: Greenwood, 1999).

A rather dated and highly anthropological anthology of essays that can be useful in understanding the broader historical and cultural contexts of *Things Fall Apart*. History teachers might find useful the excerpts from slave narratives and colonial chronicles, as well as sections on Igbo life and culture. The suggested “Topics for Written or Oral Exploration” at the end of each section could also be helpful in creating assignments and essay questions. The final section explores the language choice debate, and Achebe’s contention that his goal is “fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience” (219, from “The African Writer and the English Language”).

Understanding Things Fall Apart: Selected Essays and Criticism. Ed. Solomon O. Iyasere (New York: Whiston, 1998)

An excellent collection of scholarly essays on various themes and issues in the novel. Contents:

- “Introduction – *Things Fall Apart: An African Classic*” by Solomon Iyasere
- “The Mouth with Which to Tell Their Sufferings: The Role of Narrator and Reader in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” by Angela Smith

- “The Search for Values Theme in Chinua Achebe's Novel, *Things Fall Apart: A Crisis of the Soul*” by Willene P. Taylor
- “Rhythm and Narrative Methods in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*” by B. Eugene McCarthy
- “Narrative Techniques in *Things Fall Apart*” by Solomon O. Iyasere
- “The Sphinx and the Rough Beast: Linguistic Struggle in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*” by Julian N. Wasserman
- “Sophisticated Primitivism: The Syncretism of Oral and Literate Modes in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*” by Abdul Janmohame
- “Okonkwo's Walk: The Choreography of *Things Fall Apart*” by Russell McDougall
- “Eternal Sacred Order versus Conventional Wisdom: A Consideration of Moral Culpability in the Killing of Ikemefuna in *Things Fall Apart*” by Damian Opata
- “Okonkwo's Participation in the Killing of His ‘Son’ in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart: A Study of Ignoble Decisiveness*” by Solomon O. Iyasere

Achebe and the Politics of Representation: Form Against Itself, From Colonial Conquest and Occupation to Post-Independence Disillusionment. Ode Ogede. Africa World Press (2001).

Ogede argues that because he uses the borrowed, Western form of the historical novel, Achebe’s project belies his mission by failing to accurately represent colonial reality and by placing too much blame on the local people and not enough on the colonial powers. He sees Achebe as a “native informant” whose work ultimately reproduces the same Eurocentric principles and assumptions that it attempts to combat. Central to his argument is the idea that “historical accuracy or authenticity is a legitimate principle for evaluating literary works which claim to be historically-based. Works showing an immoderate departure, as some of Achebe’s occasionally do, from the range of what is conventionally verifiable, i.e., facts and trends documented elsewhere by objective recorders, cannot legitimately lay claim to historical authenticity. Furthermore, creative works that are inordinately obsessed with oratory at the expense of fact yield too readily to the seductive pull of fantasy. To be so enamored with the act of storytelling itself trivializes the reality of human misery, demonstrating a profound insensitivity” (xi).

Chinua Achebe. By C.L. Innes (1990). An overview of Achebe’s work, with a chapter on *Things Fall Apart*.

Chinua Achebe: Novelist, Poet, Critic. By David Carroll (1990).

Chinua Achebe: A Celebration. Ed. Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford (1990). An anthology of essays, many of them on *Things Fall Apart*.

General Resources on Africa and African Literature

African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory. Edited by Tejumola Olanyan and Ato Quayson (2007).

The definitive volume in critical studies of African literature, the essays in this 13-part volume cover the history of African literature and its criticism, as well as provide critical discussion of African literature from every major thematic and political approach. Includes essay by and about Achebe.

Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind. Curtis Keim (Second Edition, Westview: 2009)

This book is very highly recommended, especially for teachers who have never taught Africa before, or who would like suggestions for avoiding the reinforcement of stereotypes, preconceived notions, and misconceptions about Africa. This readable, accessible text is a great introduction to understanding and identifying the many stereotypes about Africa in American culture and thinking. The chapter on use of the word “tribe” would be especially helpful in teaching *Things Fall Apart*, but the entire book is of value in understanding and avoiding teaching myths about Africa.

African Novels in the Classroom, ed. Margaret Jean Hay (2000)

In addition to its chapter on *Things Fall Apart*, teachers will find useful chapters on other specific African texts which give helpful tips on how to incorporate African literature into the classroom.

Chinua Achebe: An Overview

- Poet, novelist, teacher, editor, journalist; has published over 20 books
- Born 1930, Ogidi, Nigeria (one of the 1st centers of Anglican missionary work in Eastern Nigeria)
- Father was teacher in a missionary school
- Was 28 when he published TFA, his first novel, in 1958
- Ibo ethnic/cultural background
- Graduated from University College, Ibadan
- Radio career until 1966, when he joined Biafran Ministry of Information during Biafran War (Nigerian civil war 1967-1970)
- 1970s and 80s – Prof. of English at U-Massachusetts, Amherst and U-Connecticut, Storrs
- Founding editor of Heinemann African Writers series
- Over 30 honorary degrees, many awards including German Booktrade’s Peace Prize (2002), Commonwealth Poetry Prize
- 1990 – car accident left him paralyzed from the waist down
- 2004 – rejects National Award from Nigerian gov’t and Pres. Obasanja. On rejection of the award: “Receiving awards is not the important thing. The important thing is for things to change.”

“Nigeria has disappointed me and has disappointed many Nigerians and I feel that the situation is getting worse and worse. I thought I should draw attention to this, (a wake up call) because people are losing patience and losing confidence. And Nigeria is losing its position in Africa and in the Black world and in the world as a whole. The situation in Nigeria is far below expectation.” (BBC interview, November 1, 2004 Monday All Africa News)

Selected Works by Chinua Achebe

Refugee Mother and Child

The Trouble With Nigeria, 1984

Things Fall Apart, 1958

Arrow of God, 1964

A Man of the People, 1966

African Short Stories, ed. 1984

No Longer at Ease, 1960

Another Africa, 1998

Anthills of the Savannah, 1988

The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories, 1962

Hopes and Impediments, 1988 (essay)

Home and Exile, 2000

Chike and the River, 1966

Collected Poems, 2004

Beware, Soul-Brother, and Other Poems, 1971

How the Leopard Got His Claws (with John Iroaganachi), 1972

Girls at War, 1973

Christmas at Biafra, and Other Poems, 1973

Morning Yet on Creation Day, 1975

The Flute, 1975

The Drum, 1978



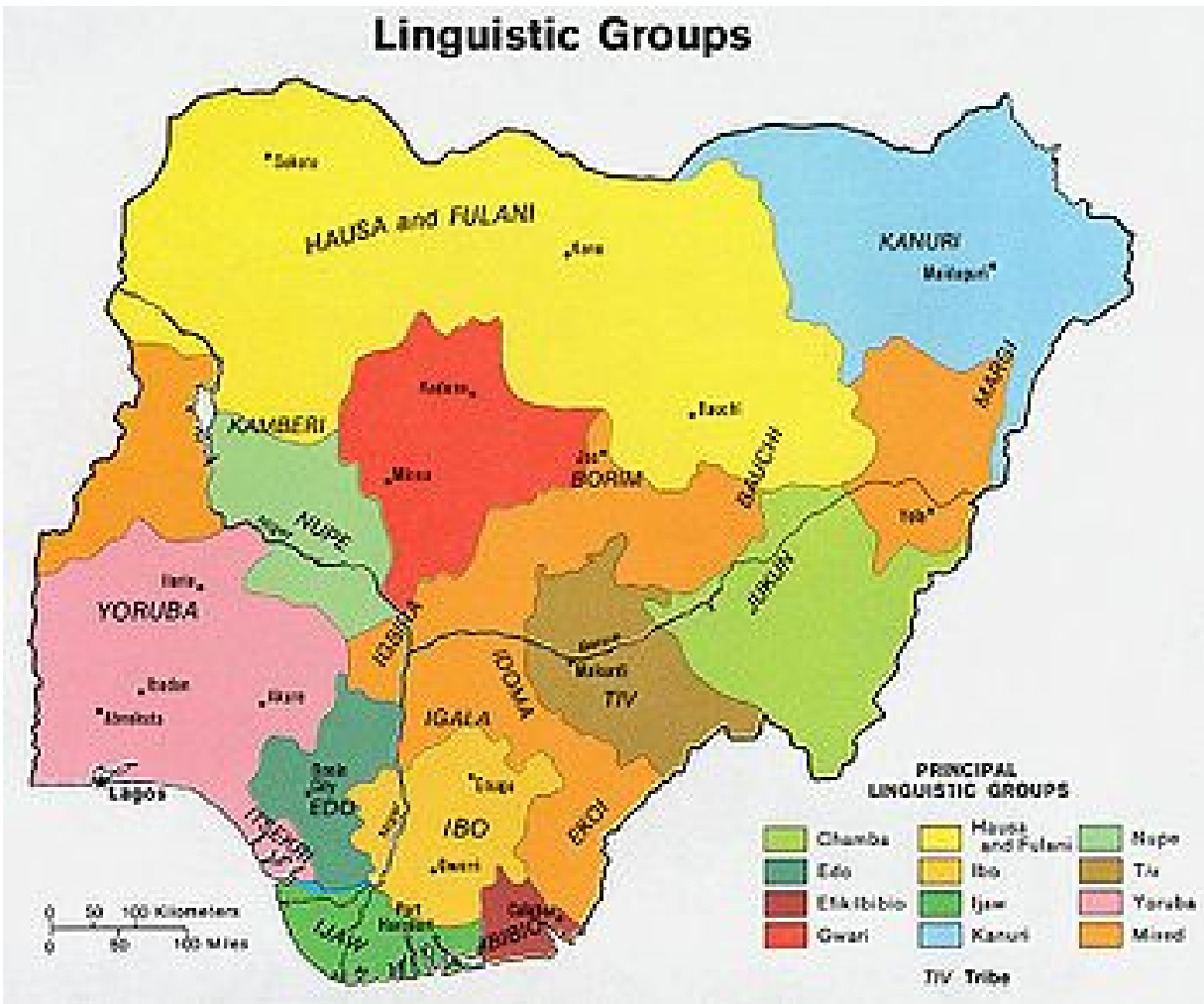
<http://printable-maps.blogspot.com/2008/08/printable-africa-map.html>



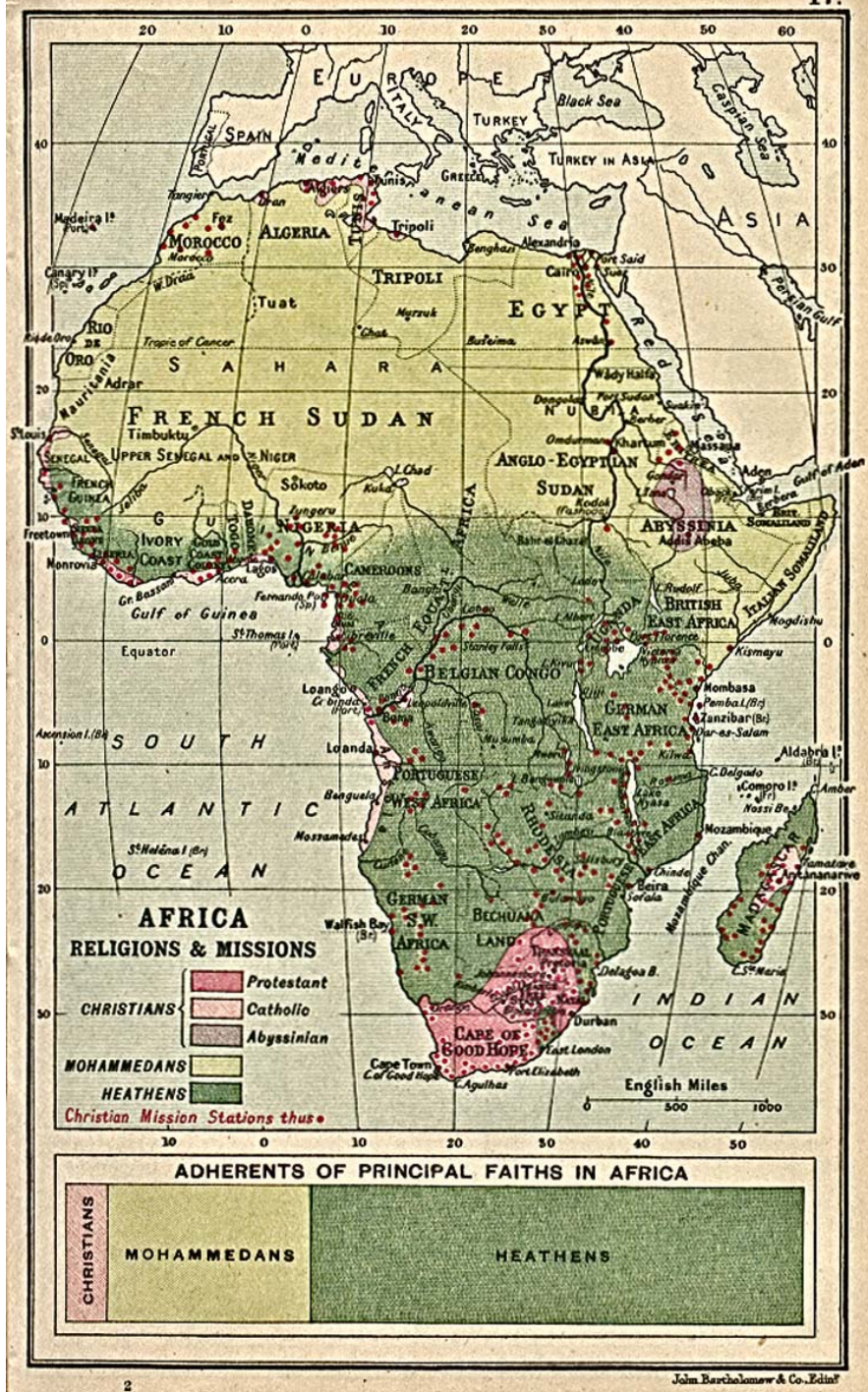
Map of Africa from Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1890

Source: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/africa_1890.jpg

Nigeria – linguistic group map



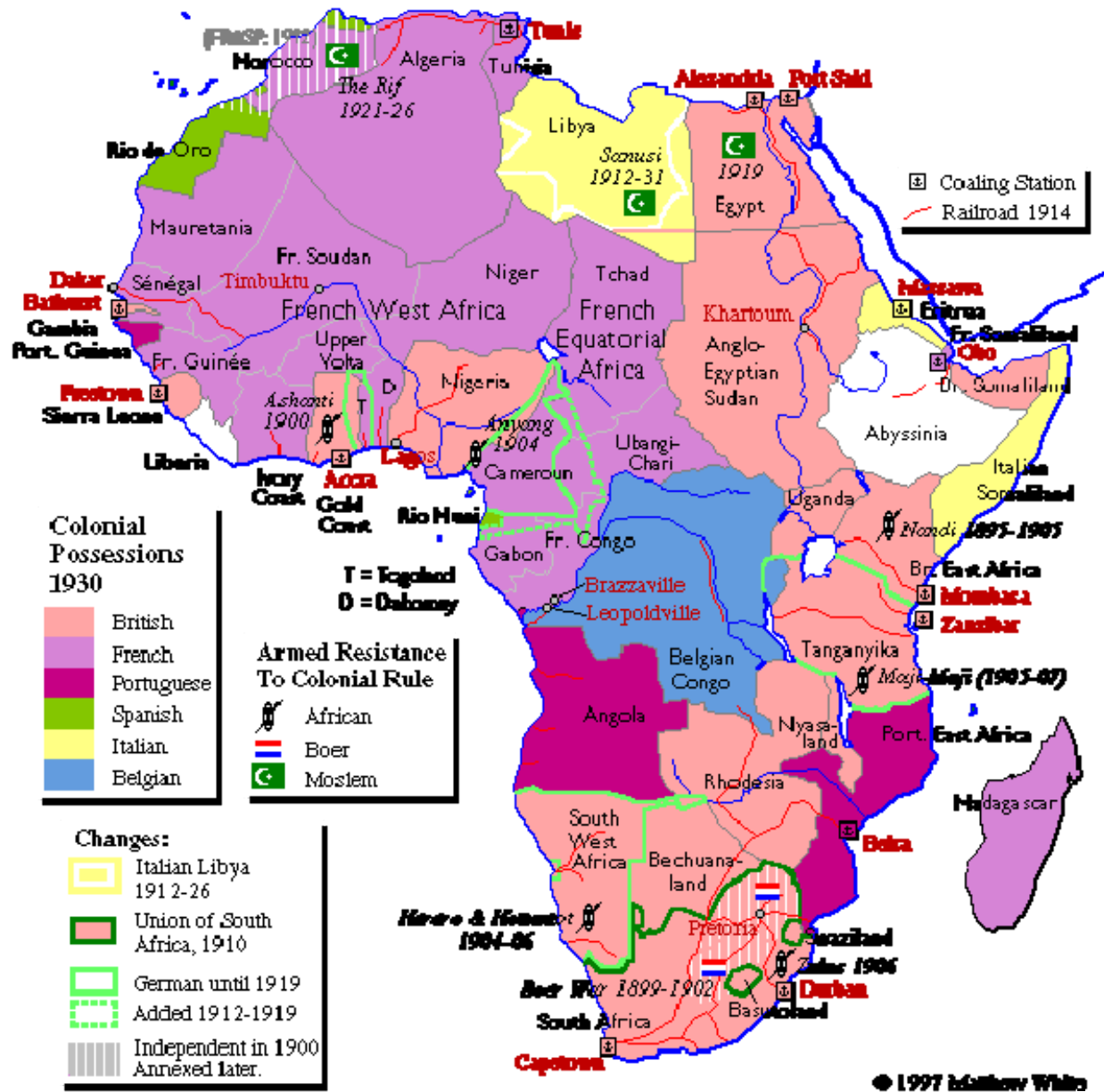
http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/58/Nigeria_linguistic_1979.jpg/350px-Nigeria_linguistic_1979.jpg



Africa by religion (Heathens, Mohammedans, Christians, 1913)

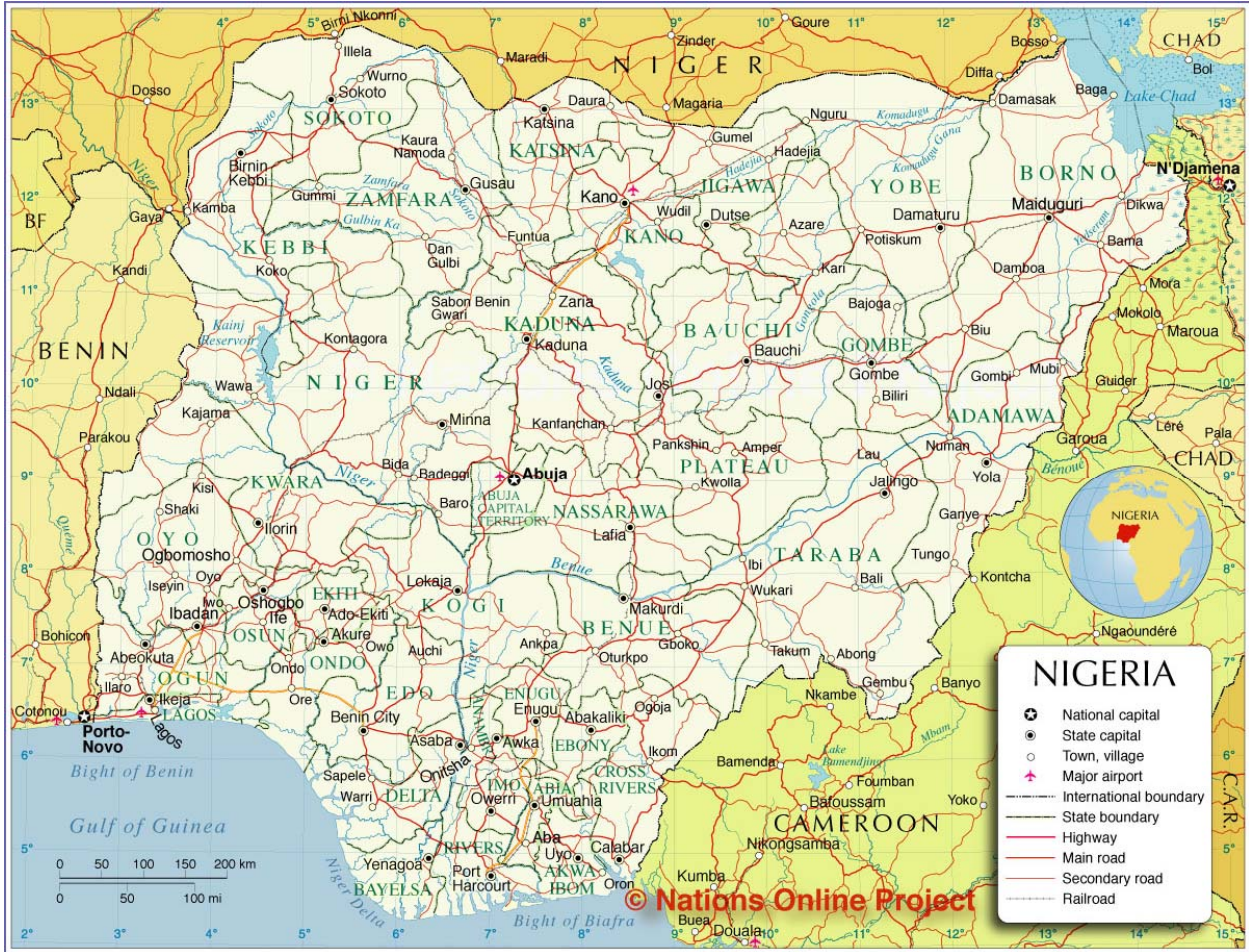
http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/africa_religion_1913.jpg

Map of Colonial Africa circa 1930

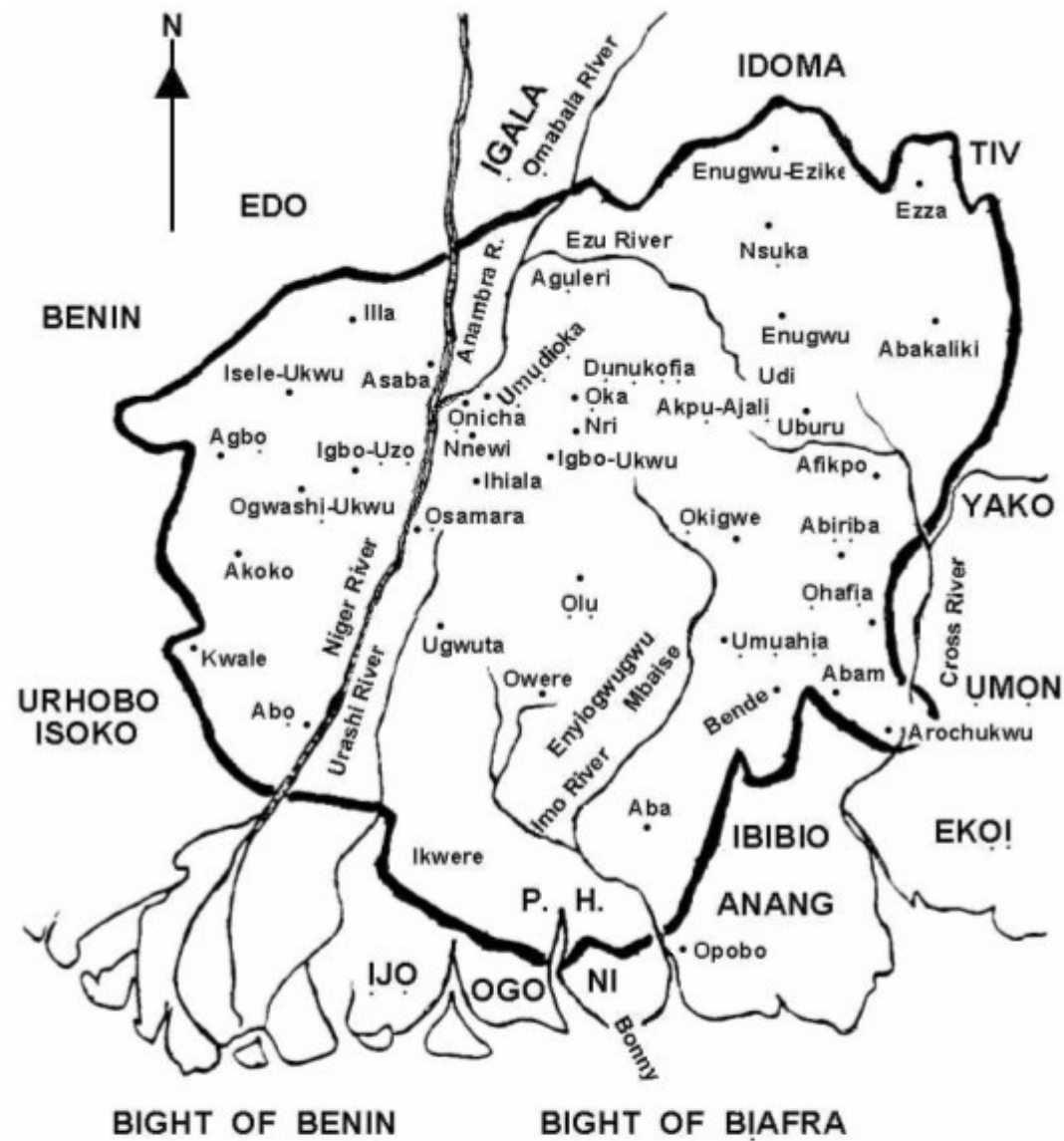


<http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/afri1914.htm>

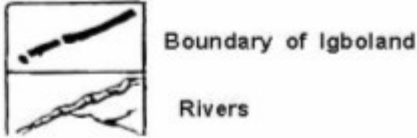
Nigeria



http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/nigeria_map2.htm



GULF OF GUINEA
 0 25 50 75
 KM
MAP OF IGBOLAND IN NIGERIA



Map of Igboland

<http://www.progressnigeria.org/igbonation/default.asp>



Post-partition Africa, 1914

http://www.blackpast.org/files/blackpast_images/Africa_1914.jpg



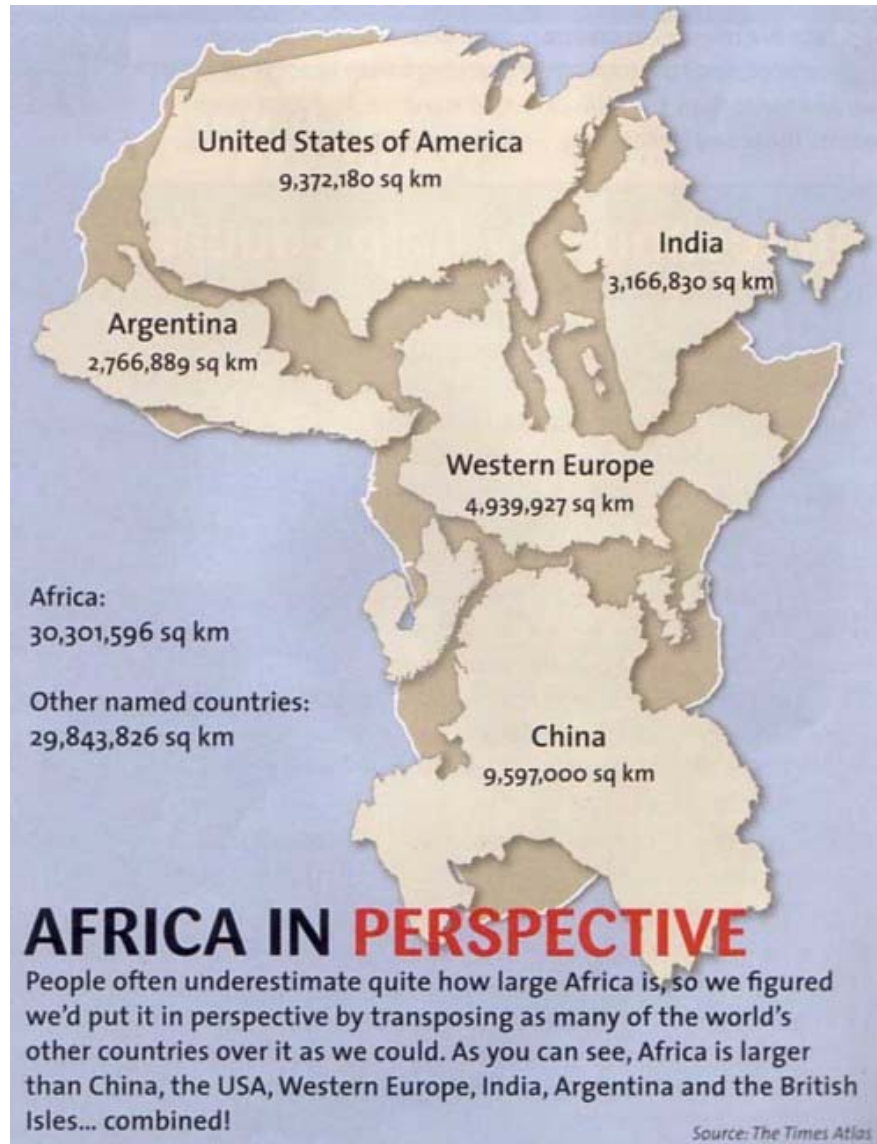
Northern and central Africa by colonial power in 1914

<http://astro.temple.edu/~barbday/Europe66/resources/images/PartitionAfrica.jpg>



“The Rhodes Colossus” – Punch cartoon of Cecil Rhodes straddled from Cairo to Capetown.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20759/20759-h/images/266.png>

How Big is Africa?



- The entire continent covers nearly **12 million square miles** – 20% of the world's total landmass
- **Population: over 900 million** – 14% of the world's people
- **53 countries** (some count 54)
- Over **2000 languages** spoken – about 50 of these have over half a million speakers



Brown University's "How Big is Africa?" poster

Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden", 1899

This famous poem, written by Britain's imperial poet, was a response to the American take over of the Phillipines after the Spanish-American War.

Take up the White Man's burden--
Send forth the best ye breed--
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild--
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

Take up the White Man's burden--
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,
An hundred times made plain
To seek another's profit,
And work another's gain.

Take up the White Man's burden--
The savage wars of peace--
Fill full the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hopes to nought.

Take up the White Man's burden--
No tawdry rule of kings,
But toil of serf and sweeper--
The tale of common things.
The ports ye shall not enter,
The roads ye shall not tread,
Go mark them with your living,
And mark them with your dead.

Take up the White Man's burden--
And reap his old reward:
The blame of those ye better,

The hate of those ye guard--
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah, slowly!) toward the light--
"Why brought he us from bondage,
Our loved Egyptian night?"

Take up the White Man's burden--
Ye dare not stoop to less--
Nor call too loud on Freedom
To cloke your weariness;
By all ye cry or whisper,
By all ye leave or do,
The silent, sullen peoples
Shall weigh your gods and you.

Take up the White Man's burden--
Have done with childish days--
The lightly proffered laurel,
The easy, ungrudged praise.
Comes now, to search your manhood
Through all the thankless years
Cold, edged with dear-bought wisdom,
The judgment of your peers!

"When the missionaries came, the Africans had the land and the Christians had the Bible. They taught us to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them they had the land and we had the Bible"

- Jomo Kenyatta (in Mazrui 149-150)

The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

- William Butler Yeats

W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1865, the son of a well-known Irish painter, John Butler Yeats. He spent his childhood in County Sligo and in London. He returned to Dublin at the age of fifteen to continue his education and study painting, but quickly discovered he preferred poetry. Born into the Anglo-Irish landowning class, Yeats became involved with the Celtic Revival, a movement against the cultural influences of English rule in Ireland during the Victorian period, which sought to promote the spirit of Ireland's native heritage. Though Yeats never learned Gaelic, his writing at the turn of the century drew extensively from sources in Irish mythology and folklore. Yeats was deeply involved in politics in Ireland, and in the twenties, despite Irish independence from England, his verse reflected a pessimism about the political situation in his country and the rest of Europe, paralleling the increasing conservatism of his American counterparts in London, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. His work after 1910 was strongly influenced by Pound, becoming more modern in its concision and imagery, but Yeats never abandoned his strict adherence to traditional verse forms. He had a life-long interest in mysticism and the occult, which was off-putting to some readers, but he remained uninhibited in advancing his idiosyncratic philosophy, and his poetry continued to grow stronger as he grew older. Appointed a senator of the Irish Free State in 1922, he is remembered as an important cultural leader, as a major playwright (he was one of the founders of the famous Abbey Theatre in Dublin), and as one of the very greatest poets of the century. W. B. Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1923.

Abridged from: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15527>

How to Write about Africa

by

Binyavanga Wainaina¹



some tips: sunsets and starvation are good

photo: www.bbc.co.uk

Always use the word 'Africa' or 'Darkness' or 'Safari' in your title. Subtitles may include the words 'Zanzibar', 'Masai', 'Zulu', 'Zambezi', 'Congo', 'Nile', 'Big', 'Sky', 'Shadow', 'Drum', 'Sun' or 'Bygone'. Also useful are words such as 'Guerrillas', 'Timeless', 'Primordial' and 'Tribal'. Note that 'People' means Africans who are not black, while 'The People' means black Africans.

Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these. If you must include an African, make sure you get one in Masai or Zulu or Dogon dress.

In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book. The continent is full of deserts, jungles, highlands, savannahs and many other things, but your reader doesn't care about all that, so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular.

Make sure you show how Africans have music and rhythm deep in their souls, and eat things no other humans eat. Do not mention rice and beef and wheat; monkey-brain is an African's cuisine of choice, along with goat, snake, worms and grubs and all manner of game meat. Make sure you show that you are able to eat such food without flinching, and describe how you learn to enjoy it—because you care.

¹ Originally published in *Granta* 92: *The View from Africa*. Available online at: <http://www.granta.com/extracts/2615>. **Binyavanga Wainaina** lives in Nairobi, Kenya. He is the founding editor of the literary magazine, *Kwani?* and won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2002.

Taboo subjects: ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless a death is involved), references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from yaws or Ebola fever or female genital mutilation.

Throughout the book, adopt a *sotto* voice, in conspiracy with the reader, and a sad *I-expected-so-much* tone. Establish early on that your liberalism is impeccable, and mention near the beginning how much you love Africa, how you fell in love with the place and can't live without her. Africa is the only continent you can love—take advantage of this. If you are a man, thrust yourself into her warm virgin forests. If you are a woman, treat Africa as a man who wears a bush jacket and disappears off into the sunset. Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated. Whichever angle you take, be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed.

Your African characters may include naked warriors, loyal servants, diviners and seers, ancient wise men living in hermitic splendour. Or corrupt politicians, inept polygamous travel-guides, and prostitutes you have slept with. The Loyal Servant always behaves like a seven-year-old and needs a firm hand; he is scared of snakes, good with children, and always involving you in his complex domestic dramas. The Ancient Wise Man always comes from a noble tribe (not the money-grubbing tribes like the Gikuyu, the Igbo or the Shona). He has rheumy eyes and is close to the Earth. The Modern African is a fat man who steals and works in the visa office, refusing to give work permits to qualified Westerners who really care about Africa. He is an enemy of development, always using his government job to make it difficult for pragmatic and good-hearted expats to set up NGOs or Legal Conservation Areas. Or he is an Oxford-educated intellectual turned serial-killing politician in a Savile Row suit. He is a cannibal who likes Cristal champagne, and his mother is a rich witch-doctor who really runs the country.

Among your characters you must always include The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West. Her children have flies on their eyelids and pot bellies, and her breasts are flat and empty. She must look utterly helpless. She can have no past, no history; such diversions ruin the dramatic moment. Moans are good. She must never say anything about herself in the dialogue except to speak of her (unspeakable) suffering. Also be sure to include a warm and motherly woman who has a rolling laugh and who is concerned for your well-being. Just call her Mama. Her children are all delinquent. These characters should buzz around your main hero, making him look good. Your hero can teach them, bathe them, feed them; he carries lots of babies and has seen Death. Your hero is you (if reportage), or a beautiful, tragic international celebrity/aristocrat who now cares for animals (if fiction).

Bad Western characters may include children of Tory cabinet ministers, Afrikaners, employees of the World Bank. When talking about exploitation by foreigners mention the Chinese and Indian traders. Blame the West for Africa's situation. But do not be too specific.

Broad brushstrokes throughout are good. Avoid having the African characters laugh, or struggle to educate their kids, or just make do in mundane circumstances. Have them illuminate something about Europe or America in Africa. African characters should be colourful, exotic,

larger than life—but empty inside, with no dialogue, no conflicts or resolutions in their stories, no depth or quirks to confuse the cause.

Describe, in detail, naked breasts (young, old, conservative, recently raped, big, small) or mutilated genitals, or enhanced genitals. Or any kind of genitals. And dead bodies. Or, better, naked dead bodies. And especially rotting naked dead bodies. Remember, any work you submit in which people look filthy and miserable will be referred to as the 'real Africa', and you want that on your dust jacket. Do not feel queasy about this: you are trying to help them to get aid from the West. The biggest taboo in writing about Africa is to describe or show dead or suffering white people.

Animals, on the other hand, must be treated as well rounded, complex characters. They speak (or grunt while tossing their manes proudly) and have names, ambitions and desires. They also have family values: *see how lions teach their children?* Elephants are caring, and are good feminists or dignified patriarchs. So are gorillas. Never, ever say anything negative about an elephant or a gorilla. Elephants may attack people's property, destroy their crops, and even kill them. Always take the side of the elephant. Big cats have public-school accents. Hyenas are fair game and have vaguely Middle Eastern accents. Any short Africans who live in the jungle or desert may be portrayed with good humour (unless they are in conflict with an elephant or chimpanzee or gorilla, in which case they are pure evil).

After celebrity activists and aid workers, conservationists are Africa's most important people. Do not offend them. You need them to invite you to their 30,000-acre game ranch or 'conservation area', and this is the only way you will get to interview the celebrity activist. Often a book cover with a heroic-looking conservationist on it works magic for sales. Anybody white, tanned and wearing khaki who once had a pet antelope or a farm is a conservationist, one who is preserving Africa's rich heritage. When interviewing him or her, do not ask how much funding they have; do not ask how much money they make off their game. Never ask how much they pay their employees.

Readers will be put off if you don't mention the light in Africa. And sunsets, the African sunset is a must. It is always big and red. There is always a big sky. Wide empty spaces and game are critical—Africa is the Land of Wide Empty Spaces. When writing about the plight of flora and fauna, make sure you mention that Africa is overpopulated. When your main character is in a desert or jungle living with indigenous peoples (anybody short) it is okay to mention that Africa has been severely depopulated by Aids and War (use caps).

You'll also need a nightclub called Tropicana, where mercenaries, evil nouveau riche Africans and prostitutes and guerrillas and expats hang out.

Always end your book with Nelson Mandela saying something about rainbows or renaissances. Because you care.

Literary Terms to put to use in your analysis papers:
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Image	A “moment” or “snapshot” in the text that stands out; a particularly vivid description (character, event, scene, or object)
Theme	(1) central idea or main point (2) A way of articulating and understanding a recurring image or motif. <i>Example:</i> the motif of the unlikely hero overcoming obstacles reveals the story’s theme of man’s struggle against his own nature.
Symbol	A textual element (image, character, object, etc) that stands for or represents something larger than itself. Symbols are a type of metaphor, but they are different from motifs in that they usually aren’t magical or spiritual in nature; they’re usually ordinary things that have symbolic significance.
Metaphor	A direct or indirect comparison between two things (similes are a type of metaphor, comparisons using “like,” “as” or “than”)
Irony	Language and situations that are inappropriate, unexpected or opposite from what one expects; saying one thing and meaning another, “double meaning.”
Satire	Satire is the use of irony to comic effect, and is generally intended as a sort of commentary or critique.
Personification	Giving human characteristics to non-human things (animals, objects, etc)

Intertextuality Direct or indirect reference to another written or oral text, or another work of art or literature, in one's work.