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## Cultural Values And Conflicts In Chinua Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart'

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### ABSTRACT

Every culture or society is the sum total of its individuals. The society is the reflection of the perspectives, faith and beliefs of an individual. Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" is a remarkable example of the portrayal of the positive and negative elements in a society, and also of how a clash between them can lead to the disintegration of a culture. Achebe has presented the Igbo society in a very realistic manner.

Achebe develops the theme of traditional verses change through a powerful presentation of the beauty, strength, and validity of traditional life and values and the disruptiveness of change. The change in this novel comes with the advent of the missionaries, and this interference in the primal society of Umuofia leads to the collision between the good and the evil, the black and the white. This paper is an attempt to describe the culture of the Ibo, an ethnic group that reside in South-East Nigeria, and the conflicts and challenges they face when Europeans arrive and attempt to colonize their society.

**Key Words:** Culture, society, disintegration, traditional, missionaries, Umuofia, Ibo, Nigeria

### Ibo Culture and it's Values

The story of Things Fall Apart follows the life of an Ibo man named Okonkwo. Okonkwo is a strong warrior who, while greatly respected and held in high regard by his people, has a fiery temper which often gets him into trouble. Okonkwo strives to maintain cultural values, but through his own shortcomings does not always succeed. Okonkwo is a wealthy man who is easily able to take care of his family. Born to a lazy and improvident father, Okonkwo started with nothing. Disgraced by his father's inability to support his family, Okonkwo attempts to find success by renouncing all the traits his father embodied: not only the bad ones, such as laziness and shame, but also the good ones, like kindness, gentleness, compromise, and acceptance. Through his hard work and dedication, Okonkwo embraces one of the culture's main values by

raising himself out of poverty and providing well for his family, thus becoming a highly respected upper-class man.

In Ibo society, men are not born into a particular class; rather, through their actions and accomplishments, they earn titles based on how well they uphold tribal values. These values include: the ability to support oneself and family respect for sacred things and tradition the ability to adapt to new challenges or surroundings

### **Cultural Values**

The Ibo people have some brutal practices such as the slaying of twins, exploitation of women, polygamy, oracles, superstitious beliefs, and indiscriminately waging war upon other villages. According to the **“whites”** these practices are the embodiment of animism and the fetish of the pagan, without any code of conduct or ethics.

But like every coin, there is another facet to this culture. The Ibo culture also has its beauty and its pride; the people believe in the poetry of life and are inclined to lead a simple life, far away from the maddening crowd. Their behaviour highlights the most fundamental human character: sharing in the happiness and the sorrow of others. Okonkwo is shown as a cruel man in his treatment of his wives when **“he is so carried away in his anger at his youngest wife that he forgets the ritual of the Week of Peace and breaks the rules of kindness and gentleness”** but he is an ideal man who adheres to the custom of his village where people believe **“No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children he was not really a man.”** The other side of his nature is exposed when as per the Ibo culture he has to kill Ikemefuna. He is so upset that he doesn't eat for the next three days. Not able to overcome his sentiments, he curses himself, **“When did you become a shivering old woman? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed.”**

The people belonging to the clan are not governed by selfish motives. They are very happy to lend a helping hand to others while at work. They have art and music that is truly their own, and have their own rituals, ceremonies and festivities. One of the greatest examples of their customs and traditions is the feast of the New Yam. It is through this festivity that the Igbo people thank the earth goddess and the source of all fertility, Am. Igbo culture is unique culture in itself, and just like any other culture. It has its merits and demerits.

### **Religious values**

Religion is significant in Ibo culture. They're **polytheistic**, with different gods or goddesses to oversee each aspect of life. All of these gods and goddesses report to Chukwu, the head god. Different aspects of Ibo religion come up throughout the novel, and several times religion and religious observances play a major role in the plot.

In accordance with the Ibo value, Okonkwo generally has a high respect for sacred things and customs. However, his rage can sometimes blind him. Okonkwo is driven not by an urge to be a strong or respected person, but by the urge to not appear weak. Okonkwo's abject fear of failure leads to his frequent bouts of anger, aggression and violence. One example of this is the Week of Peace. As Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess, says: **'We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow.'** This observance is an important aspect of Igbo society, and knowing this helps the reader understand the gravity of the situation when Okonkwo breaks the peace. Understanding Igbo culture sheds light on why this is an important incident, and why Okonkwo must make amends directly to the goddess through her temple

## Cultural Conflict

The African novel, in general is known for its depiction of various cultural tensions and conflicts arising out of a clash between tradition and modernity, the real and the occult and so on. But, it is the conflict between the individual and the society and the way in which it is resolved, that seems to lend a typical African flavour to the African novel, thus distinguishing it from its European counterpart.

The Missionaries guide the **“black people”** about morality and education, and ask them to change with the changing times. It is not surprising that the missionaries create a mental and social turmoil in the Igbo society. Their arrival has resulted in a cultural clash. They are able to set even the fathers and sons at loggerheads, in the name of religion and morality. And when under the influence of the invaders a brother starts killing his brother, the culture is bound to disintegrate. **“While deploring the imperialists’** brutality and condescension, Achebe seems to suggest that change is inevitable and wise men reconcile themselves to accommodating change. It can be said that the people of the Igbo society end themselves up in a conflagration, which had been ignited by the missionaries.

Okonkwo, the tragic hero of this story is a man who represents his culture, and is never ready to renounce it even at the cost of his life. He is out of his wits when he finds his son Nwoye, besides others, embracing Christianity. He curses the white man, **“How can he when he 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 bad.”** Things start to fall apart as there is chaos and disorder in the Igbo society. And by the time the truth dawns on the Igbo people, it is too late. They realize at length that **“the white man came quietly and peaceably with the religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”**

As time passes and the white man becomes more and more ingrained into African civilization, Okonkwo realizes that they are in essence being taken over. Once again, his rage overtakes him and Okonkwo murders one of the white messengers. Okonkwo's anger blinds him and renders him unable to adapt to his new environment like the other villagers have, as the narrator relays on page 205, when it says "[Okonkwo] knew that Umuofia would not go to war.... [The villagers] had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: **"Why did he do it?"** Unlike the other

villagers, Okonkwo had not realized that rebelling against the white men would only anger them and cause them to fight back.

Okonkwo's tragedy is the greatest example of the disaster that takes place with the merger of the east and the west. **"He can't take living under the rule of foreign men who don't speak his language or know his customs. So, rather than bear the yoke of colonization, he hangs himself"**. It is the irony of his fate when he is not even given a proper burial since committing suicide is considered a sin in the Igbo culture.

## Conclusion

Change is inevitable in a society. Toynbee has pointed out in his book, *A study of History*, **"cultures once born, do not continue to evolve automatically but have to be rejuvenated periodically"**<sup>6</sup>. This regeneration occurs through an interaction or encounter with another culture. The challenge provided by the alien culture results a new culture. However, when the challenge from the new culture prove too strong for the old culture, then the latter may succumb to the new culture.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the ability to adapt to change is ultimately most important to the tribesmen's survival. But Okonkwo's inability to adapt leads to despair and he takes his own life: **"...they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead"** (pg 207). In contrast, Obierika's thoughtful nature allows him to recognize why the white Christians were able to infiltrate and dominate their society:

**"The white man...came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. [The white man] has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."** (p. 176)

Although Obierika regrets the loss of all the tribe considered sacred, he manages to survive by resigning himself to those changes.

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