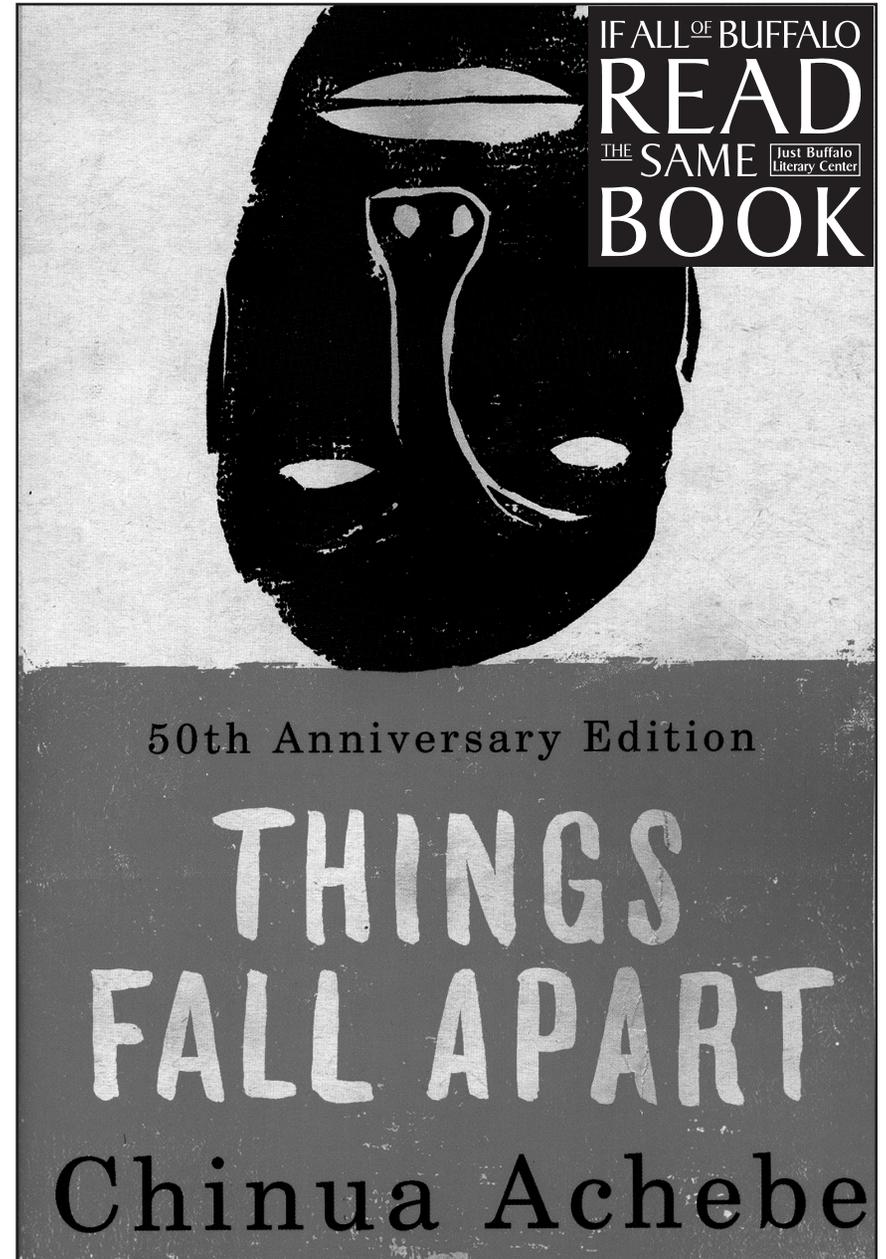
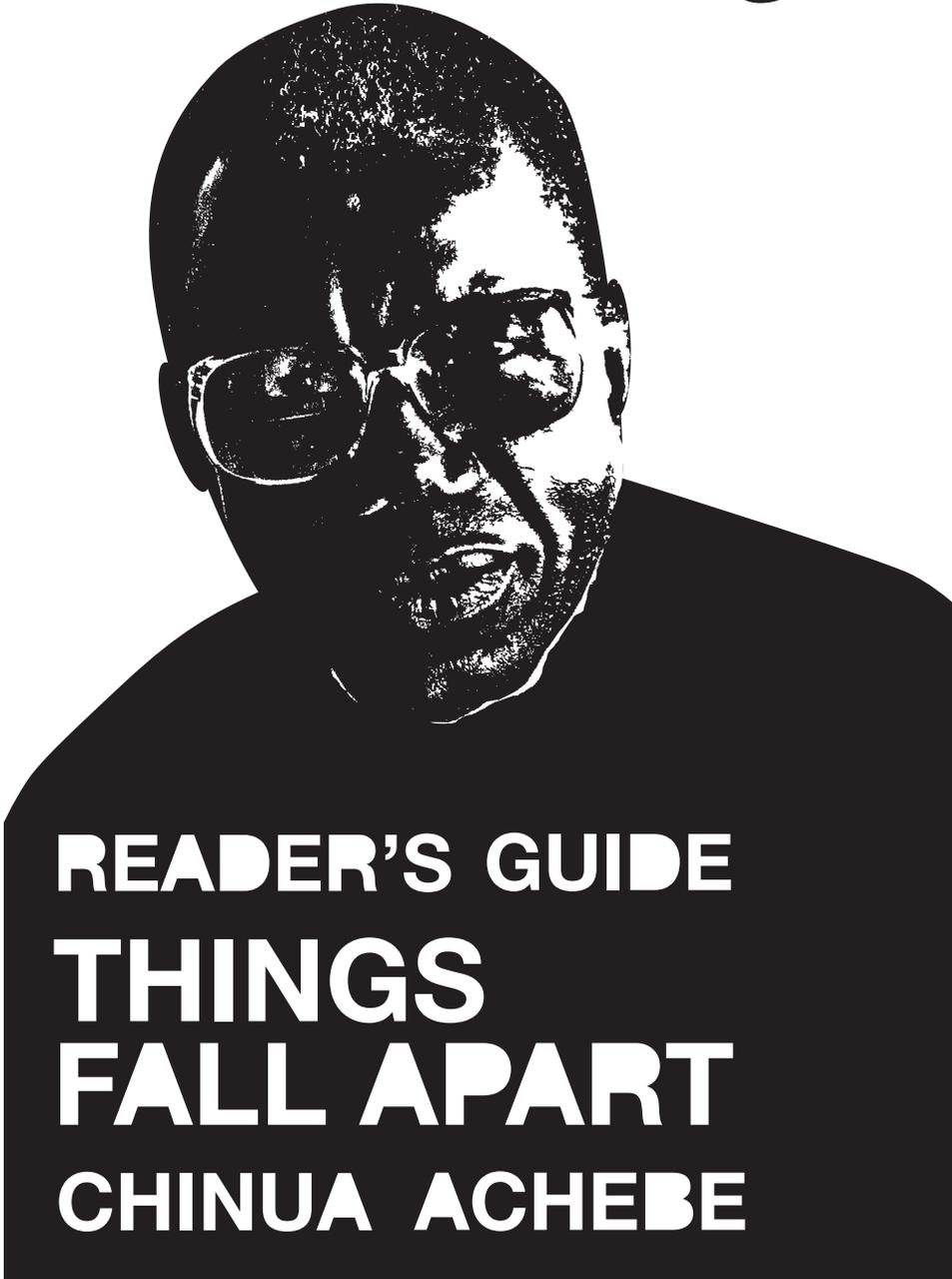


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CHINUA ACHEBE

Chinua Achebe has said that living in Nigeria is the only thing that “nourishes” his writing about the place—“the relationship between me and the society I write about is so close and so necessary.” However, since a 1990 car accident in Nigeria left him paralyzed from the waist down, he has lived in the Hudson River Valley in New York, where he is a professor of English at Bard College.

Despite this, Achebe remains determined to go home.

As a child, Achebe traveled to his father’s ancestral home, Ogidi, Nigeria, for the first time at age five. The journey, he has written, “was not working out right.” He was “[s]itting in the back of a truck and facing what seemed the wrong way, I could not see where we were going, only where we were coming from.”

Achebe would eventually absorb both elements of this vision (“where we were going... where we were coming from”), and use it to understand both his father’s missionary Christianity and the remnants of traditional Igbo village life. He attributes his writing career to this perspective, which was “not a separation but a bringing together, like the necessary backward step which a judicious viewer may take in order to see a canvas steadily and fully.”

Achebe was born Albert Chinualumogu in 1930—the first name a “tribute to Victorian England” he later dropped—and was raised in a village where “the old ways” rejected by his father “were still active and alive.” Although his parents’ “reverence for books was almost superstitious,” and although he was always “fond of stories and intrigued by language,” Achebe did not consider being a writer (he has said that he did not know “such creatures” existed until later in life).

Achebe attended University College, Ibadan from 1948 until 1953. While in college, he was inspired to write *Things Fall Apart* after he read the imperialist account of Nigeria by Joyce Cary, *Mister Johnson*—a novel lauded at the time of its publication as an outstanding depiction of Africa, but one in which tribal dancers, for example, are described as “demonic,” “grinning, shrieking, scowling, or with faces which seemed entirely dislocated, senseless and unhuman.”



“I decided the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well intentioned,” Achebe has said. He began writing *Things Fall Apart* two years after he finished school and published it three years later in 1958. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, which has been described as the beginning of the modern African canon and the most singular contribution Africa has made to world literature.

The impulse to write *Things Fall Apart* continued to motivate his writing career as well as his engagement with the changing politics of Nigeria. Achebe published three novels in the next decade, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), and *A Man of the People* (1966), the last of which described a military coup not unlike the one that would seize Nigeria the same year. Achebe worked in radio until 1966, then participated as a revolutionary in the Biafran War, a bloody and eventually unsuccessful attempt by Igbos to secede from Nigeria.

It took Achebe until 1987 to publish his next novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, in part because the traumatic experience and aftermath of a war in which more than a million people died made him feel that writing a novel was “a frivolous thing.” Throughout his career, he has written five books of non-fiction as well as several children’s books, short stories and poems.

For Achebe, the highest stakes have been getting African stories told properly. “Storytelling has to do with power,” he has said. “Those who win tell the story; those who are defeated are not heard. But that has to change. It’s in the interest of everybody, including the winners, to know that there’s another story. If you only hear one side of the story, you have no understanding at all.”

THE IGBO PEOPLE

More than ten million Igbo people live in Nigeria. Traditionally, they organize themselves into small, self-governing villages, like “the nine villages” in *Things Fall Apart*.

According to Achebe’s essay, “My Home Under Imperial Fire,” the precolonial Igbo village in which he lived in 1935 was one of about 800 villages, many of which were connected by markets through which the people exchanged goods and news. The Igbo proudly shunned a centralized leadership structure and instead governed their towns collectively, believing that each individual was endowed with a unique *chi*, or presence of God, that gave each person individual value. Village affairs were decided during popular assemblies, which everyone could attend and where everyone could speak. Men had different roles and prominence in the villages based on their title, age and occupation, while women managed the homes and markets.

Achebe has said Igbos are “not easygoing” and have a “tense and cocky temperament,” character traits borne from living “in a world of continual struggle, motion and change... like a tightrope walk, a hairbreadth brush with the boundaries of anarchy” that comes with the political organization of their communities. The Igbo in Nigeria survive, even though the villages Achebe depicts in *Things Fall Apart* no longer exist in the same way.

He has said that the weakness of such a society is its “lack of adaptation,” its inability to “bend.” One of its strengths is an acknowledgment of difference. Igbo proverbs are full of statements like “What there is among one people is not among another.” Achebe says that “[i]t’s as if Igbo culture is constantly anxious to remind you of the complexity of the world.”

Achebe has said that the disruption of village life by the British government that happens in the second half of the novel, and in real-life, 20th-century Nigeria “was not a temporary disturbance; it was a once and for all alteration of their society.” That irreparable disturbance was caused by the colonial reorganization of loosely-affiliated villages into an all-inclusive nation that forced the incorporation of peoples (including the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa) that previously had little day-to-day connection.



TRADITIONAL IGBO MASK

But, Achebe claims, this disturbance was not a complete destruction of Igbo culture. The people who own “healthy cultures,” he has said, “will ensure that they make adjustments: they drop what can no longer be carried in transition.” One of the things the Igbo did not jettison, he notes, is their emphasis on every person’s worth and their democratic principle that everybody should participate in government.

After the disintegration of the independent state of Nigeria in 1966, the Igbo were the target of genocidal violence. Their unsuccessful struggle to separate from Nigeria, the Biafran War, was in many ways a struggle to uphold fundamental Igbo principles. “The sanctity of human life, the happiness of people and the right to pull out of any arrangement that doesn’t suit them stands above all,” Achebe has said when discussing the Igbo’s motivation for seceding from the military-led country.

In 1992, Achebe called Nigeria neither a mother nor a father but a “child”: “Gifted, enormously talented, prodigiously endowed, and wayward.” In 2000, he likened it to a wobbly tripod that “refuses to stand” on the three “legs” of its major, often competing, ethnic groups, the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa. He also seemed hopeful about its future after the country’s first democratic elections.

“All we have done is turn around,” he said. “We were facing the wrong direction before.”

QUESTIONS

1. Chinua Achebe has said that during the period in which *Things Fall Apart* is set, the “weakness” of Igbo society, and particularly of the “strong men” like Okonkwo who lived in it, was a “lack of adaptation, not being able to bend.” Where in the novel is a lack of adaptation evident? What are the consequences of an inability to adapt?
2. How would you characterize the spread and influence of the Western missionaries and colonizers’ ideas in the villages? If the Igbo’s failure was a “lack of adaptation,” what was the missionaries’ crime?
3. There is a distinction made between “plain talk” and proverb, both of which are crucial parts of the Igbo’s everyday speech in *Things Fall Apart*. When do characters use one form or the other? When does the narrator use one form or the other in telling the story? How do proverbs, each a small story, make up the larger tale?
4. Okonkwo’s son, Nwoye, is first drawn to Christianity by the missionaries’ songs. “It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow” that captivated him. Why would music and poetry be an effective bridge across the two cultures? What role do music and art play in Igbo life and what role do they play in the missionaries’ religion?
5. Who makes the rules and who enforces them in Umuofia? Who has a say in the community? Would you consider it a democratic system? Why or why not?
6. How does the killing of Ikemefuna haunt the novel? What does his death—and the way it is remembered by different characters—demonstrate about village customs?
7. Discuss the three generations in Okonkwo’s family—his father, himself and his son. What traits do they share? How are they different? What do they fear inheriting from the previous generation or want to pass on to the next?

8. What are some stories characters tell one another in the novel? Are they moral, spiritual, used for entertainment or to convey news?
9. Achebe has written that African writers who use English to write about their homelands require “a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.” Where do you see evidence of the “new English” in *Things Fall Apart*? Where do you see evidence of borrowing from a Western literary tradition?
10. Whose voice takes over in the novel’s final paragraph? What are the implications of this shift?
11. Is it important that a gun—a Western weapon—malfunctioned and caused Okonkwo’s ruin in the first section of the novel? What does it prefigure in the rest of the book?
12. What role do exiles and outcasts play in the novel? How does belonging—in a fatherland or motherland, in a village or not—make the villagers susceptible to outside influence?



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