Achebe's Influence on African Writers

*Things Fall Apart* was a groundbreaking work when it was published in 1958. Some Africans have criticized Achebe for writing in English, claiming that he is not promoting African literature and culture. But many critics have praised him for creating an authentic Ibo prose style in English. Indeed, Achebe has influenced the African writers who came after him; they have fashioned their own African prose styles in English. Many Ibo novelists, in particular, followed Achebe in writing about traditional society or focusing on the conflict between old and new values. Even some established Nigerian writers were highly influenced by Achebe. After the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, they changed their prose style and began to write fiction in an African style.

How the Ibo Governed

Unlike other ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Ibo did not have a king who ruled over them. The Ibo governed by consensus. In village meetings such as those described in the novel, men of title hashed out the issues and made decisions. They were called the *ndichie*, or leading citizens. The largest unit of government among the Ibo was a loose affiliation of villages, like the nine villages of Umuofia. The Ibo also had an ingenious way of ensuring that no one in the clan gained too much wealth and therefore too much power. In order to take titles, men had to distribute their excess wealth. To receive the highest title in the clan, a man had to pay the debt of every member of the community. Needless to say, few men accepted this privilege.

Women in the Tribe

Ibo women were not without power, and Achebe describes the *umuada*, or daughters of the clan, who seem to exercise authority in certain arenas. According to Rhonda Coleman, a critic who has studied the anthropological literature on the Ibo, the *umuada* also regulated the markets in each town and settled civic and marital disputes. The wives of the clan would bring pressure to bear on a man guilty of wife abuse through public humiliation. Women would harass him in front of clan members with songs and gestures of a rude nature until he changed his behavior. In the meantime, according to Coleman, kinswomen of the battered woman who had married into the clan would pressure their own men to do something about the abuse.
Chi, The Spiritual Double

According to an Ibo proverb, “Nothing can stand alone; there must always be another thing standing beside it.” So too, a human being must have some company. Chi is a person’s spiritual “double,” linking him or her to the ancestors, the unborn, and to Chukwu, the great God that created all the other gods and humankind. While a man who says “yes” may get his chi to agree with him, that same man may find himself in trouble if he goes against a strong “no” emanating from his chi. In the Ibo world-view, chi gets the last word.

Ani and Agbala

According to Kalu Ogbaa in Gods, Oracles and Divination, Ani is the earth goddess in charge of morality; she also controls the fertility of people, animals, and plants and serves as a symbolic womb for the dead before they are reborn. The Ibo, who traditionally were farmers, held Ani in high regard because they depended on her for food. Ani is the daughter of Chukwu, the creator of the world and of all other gods.

Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, is the voice or messenger of Ani. Although Agbala is a male, he is strongly associated with the female earth; his name can also mean “woman,” and he is served by a priestess. Agbala has an important role in the governing of Umuofia because his pronouncements are considered unquestionable and must be carried out by the clan.

Storytelling in Oral Cultures

African oral tradition is rich in folk tales, myths, riddles, and proverbs. These forms are imaginative, but they also serve religious, social, and educational functions. The Ibo, like other peoples throughout the world, use folk tales and proverbs to instill the clan’s morality in their children and to pass on their beliefs about spirituality and the nature of the universe.

Ibo Currency

Among the Ibo—as in many other regions of Africa—cowrie shells were formerly used as money. The cowrie is a shiny, white and tan mollusk (snail), about a half-inch long. The major portion of the bride-price for Obierika’s daughter (Akueke) is 20 bags of cowries. In Achebe’s World, Robert Wren explains that each bag would have contained about 24,000 cowries and would have weighed about 60 pounds.

Kola and Chalk

The chalk made of white clay was used by the Ibo in rituals. It symbolizes peace. An Ibo custom was to break a kola nut with a guest. Together, kola and chalk symbolize an intimacy between host and guest. This ritual allows Okoye, in the opening scenes of the novel, to bring up the debt of Okonkwo’s father, Unoka, in an atmosphere of good feeling.
The African Drum

The African “talking drums” are used as musical instruments, but they can reproduce the rhythms and pitches of African languages. The slit drum, or ekwe, was used by the Ibo—a hollowed log about a foot in diameter and three feet long. It could be struck to create varying tones corresponding to the pitches of spoken language. Thus, the drum could “talk” with a limited vocabulary about a subject.

Agricultural Staples

Among the most important crops cultivated by the Ibo are the yam and the oil palm. The African yam is a large tuber with a thick, dark outer skin covering white meat. Yams can be boiled, mashed, fried, or roasted like potatoes. The oil palm tree reaches heights of 30 feet or more. Small oval fruit grows in large clusters at the base of the leaves. Oil from the fruit’s soft shell is used to make soap and candles. Palm-kernel oil squeezed from the hard nut inside the fruit is used in margarine.

Edema: The Swelling Disease

Okonkwo’s father, Unoka, has the misfortune of contracting edema, the condition that condemned him to a dishonorable death in the Evil Forest. Edema, also called dropsy or hydrops, is swelling caused when too much fluid is stored in body tissues and cavities. It can be symptomatic of a wide range of disorders, including heart and kidney disease.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ibo Edibles</th>
<th>alligator pepper</th>
<th>sometimes called wild ginger or malagueta (Portuguese). This spice grows well on land newly cleared and burnt for farming.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>foo-foo</td>
<td>(also spelled fufu) a dough made from mashed yams or from another tuber, called cassava. Foo-foo might be served in a calabash, a container made from the hollow shells of the gourd-like fruit of the calabash tree. Foo-foo, usually eaten with a tasty sauce, is a staple food in many regions of West Africa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>palm wine</td>
<td>a sweet wine made from the sap of the raffia palm tree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>kola nut</td>
<td>a nut inside the kola, which looks like a green grapefruit. Nuts are silver or pink and their juice contains caffeine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>coco-yam</td>
<td>a large-leafed plant with round underground tubers, called taro in Asia, and known in the United States as the base for Hawaiian poi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cassava</td>
<td>root vegetable, also called manioc. Its leaves are rich in nutrients. The roots are processed to make foo-foo. The leaves are cooked as a green vegetable. In granular form, cassava is known as tapioca. Cassava, in its various processed forms, is a staple food in many parts of West Africa.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ibo Titles
Ozo was the title an Ibo man took as soon as his wealth and prestige were great enough to warrant that his voice be attended in communal decision-making. The next title was idemili, with the man taking it called “Ogbuefi” from that point on. Two more titles could also be taken, as well as a very rare fifth title, which carried the connotation of “king.” However, this title was ceremonial; a king was never an actual ruler.

Mmo: Community of the Living and Dead
The first title taken by a man was also an initiation into mmo, the spirit world in which the ancestors lived. The spirits ruled along with the living men, sometimes revealing themselves through oracles, priests, and the egwugwu. The egwugwu were a select group of men initiated into the spiritual knowledge of the clan. During festivals and ceremonies, men dressed as egwugwu became the spirits or ancestors of the clan. The egwugwu could also function as a council of elders to settle tribal disputes.

VOCABULARY

Chapters 10, 11

What’s That You’re Wearing?
Achebe describes the egwugwu’s body as being one of “smoked raffia.” The long, plumelike leaves of the raffia palm were used for tying up plants and making mats, baskets, masks, hats, and even for the costume that Okonkwo wore.

The red cam wood tree provided a dye that the Ibo women used in the decorative painting of their bodies, much the way henna is used in the Middle East.

Ezinma the Night Rider
Achebe never explains Chielo’s mysterious night ride with Ezinma on her back, but according to Robert Wren in Achebe’s World, this could have been her way of introducing the family to the idea that the girl had been chosen by Agbala to eventually succeed Chielo as high priestess.

Iba, the Fever of Malaria
Iba, the sickness that visits Ezinma in Chapter 9, usually refers to the fever that accompanies a malarial attack. Malaria is caused by a parasitic infection of red blood cells. Human beings get the parasite when they are bitten by an infected Anopheles mosquito.

Marriage, Ibo Style
Bride-price helped ensure a marriage’s stability. If a man turned out to be a bad husband, his wife could return home and the family could deny him the return of the bride-price. If she left him without a good cause, he could demand the bride-price back.

After the bride-price was settled, a second ceremony called uri took place, after which the bride paid a long visit to the groom’s family. The isa-ifи ceremony was the formal acceptance of the bride into her husband’s family. A girl was normally married at 16.
Missionaries Among the Ibo

Christian missionaries arrived in Nigeria as early as the 16th century, along with the Portuguese explorers. Their stay was brief, however, since deadly malaria and other tropical diseases made missionary work too dangerous. By the mid-19th century, quinine had been discovered as a malaria remedy, and missionary activities increased. The first wave of missions was established on or near the Niger River.

By the turn of the century, most of the violent opposition to Christianity had subsided or had been stamped out. The Roman Catholic Holy Ghost Fathers were the second Christian Missionary group to arrive in West Africa. The earlier group was the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) of the Anglican Church of England. The missionaries moved further into the Ibo hinterland of southeastern Nigeria, right behind the colonists, as “pacification of the natives” continued.

The missionaries established schools and trained many African converts to teach and preach. One of them was Chinua Achebe’s father, who worked for the C.M.S. Achebe’s great-grandfather was friendly with the missionaries, and he did not object when his ward and grandson, Isaiah Achebe, became a Christian.

Iron Horse

The Europeans came among the Ibo with their “iron horses”—i.e., bicycles.

Outcast from the Clan:
The Osu

No one knows the origin of the osu, but Robert Wren points out in Achebe’s World that they may represent a “living sacrifice” to the gods. That is, instead of being killed they were made to suffer by living as social outcasts. As Achebe tells us, these outcasts were among the early Christian converts. Osu were the lowest class in Ibo society. Above them were slaves (ohu) and the free born (amadi). An osu could never change his or her status. The osu formed their own farming communities and, when they were large enough, even instituted their own title system.

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Chapters 16, 17

Nigerian Name Calling

vile loathsome; disgusting
miscreant villain; infidel; heretic
despicable worthy of contempt or scorn
effeminate characterized by weakness or excessive refinement
degenerate having fallen to an undesirable or lower state
impudent insolent; offensively bold
Colonialism in Iboland

Things Fall Apart is set near the beginning of the 20th century, at the time when the British colonial authority, missions, and trade had penetrated Iboland (now southeastern Nigeria). The British term for their activities from about 1900 to 1920 was “pacification.” African resistance to pacification was met by the British policy of “collective punishment.” No effort was made to identify guilty rebels; instead, a whole village, or even more than one village, would be punished. British soldiers would shoot people and destroy their homes. However, some communities did not resist the colonists and even welcomed them and traded with them.

Court Messengers

Court Messengers, named kotma by the Ibo, were usually Africans from families of aliens or ex-slaves—people who had no stake in the existing social order. Kotma were employed by the District Commissioner. They were the lowest people on the governmental totem pole, but they still represented colonial authority. It was their job to bring messages, summonses, and warrants from the British courts. The kotma soon took on a police function, bringing people to trial and guarding the prison. Many kotma abused their power. Since the Ibo had no kings, the Commissioner had no way of indirectly imposing his laws on them through native rulers, and so the kotma became an integral part of British colonial rule.

The Ibo Today

The British ruled Nigeria for less than 60 years (1903–1960), but the colonial legacy was still far reaching. The rules of various tribal peoples were replaced by a version of Western constitutional government over a federation that presently consists of 19 states.

After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, regional politics based on traditional tribes dominated the country. In a military takeover in 1966, many Ibo were killed. In 1967, the Ibo declared their homeland in the southeast a new country—Biafra. They fought a bloody three-year war of independence, which they lost. Since then, the national government has been held alternately by military and civilian leaders. Nigeria continues to struggle with sustaining a successful democracy in a huge country with a population of over 100 million people of many ethnic groups, with different languages, customs, and lifestyles.

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Chapter 22

Mortal Combat

Religious Righteousness

The Reverend James Smith arrives in Umuofia, fully prepared to slay (kill) the “prophets of Baal.” This is a reference to the Book of Kings in the Bible. The Hebrew prophet Elijah tells the prophets of Baal (a nature god) to call on their god and have him show his power. When Baal fails to do so, Elijah has Baal’s prophets put to death.