

# Themes



## Impact of Colonial Domination

The British colonialists arrive in Umuofia with the intention to “bring civilization” to Africa by supplanting Ibo religion and culture. They arrive non-confrontationally and the clans allow them to stay, misinterpreting their silence for peace. Obierika recognizes how this strategy disguises their intentions and gives them the freedom to grow and fortify. The political consequences is that the clan becomes divided by the new religion, and without strength in unity, the Ibo are vulnerable to British control and rule. The British judge the Ibo by standards the Ibo are not familiar with. The District Commissioner’s ‘justice’ is corrupt and hypocritical, as is evident when the elders are falsely imprisoned. When Okonkwo returns from exile, Christianity is well established. Mr. Brown has started teaching the people how to read and write, and several traditions have been abolished as ‘savage’. Reverend Smith encourages fanaticism in his converts, motivating them to insult and humiliate the clan. Under Reverend Smith’s wrathful guidance, the colonial agenda becomes transparently aggressive. Not all Ibo people resist this transformation, which causes the destruction of the indigenous culture.

## Transformation and Tradition

Most Ibo, including Okonkwo, are caught in the struggle between the social and religious changes of the British missionaries, and their traditions. The gradual disintegration of the essence of the Ibo people, makes the clan vulnerable to the arrival of the missionaries and colonialism. The homogeneity falls apart with clansmen, especially outcasts gaining elevated status in Christianity, accepting a new way of life. While the European influence brings new opportunities and techniques, it also threatens to extinguish the traditional methods of farming, harvesting, building and cooking. Okonkwo’s resistance to this cultural change is due to his fear of losing his societal status. His sense of self-worth is dependent upon the traditional standards by which society judges him. When Okonkwo kills a messenger, his lack of support from the clan reflects the people’s acceptance of transformation.

## Repression

Okonkwo represses his emotions because he fears appearing weak and effeminate. This leads to his tragic outbursts of anger and violence that cause problems for him. Afraid of being thought weak, Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna against the advice of Ezeudu. This deepens the gap with Nwoye. His acts of anger are considered by the clan as acts against the earth goddess.

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## Masculinity

Okonkwo is ashamed of his father's indolent behaviour. For this reason he is hard on his son, Nwoye, who is gentle and sensitive. Okonkwo associates masculinity with aggression and feels that anger is the only emotion that he should display. He frequently beats his wives, even threatening to kill them. Okonkwo's idea of manliness is not the clan's. He berates his ancestors for avoiding bloodshed. Okonkwo not only volunteers to join the party that will execute his surrogate son, but also kills him because he is afraid of appearing weak. Okonkwo's exile reinforces his notions of masculinity as he regards his uncle Uchendu, a pacifist, as effeminate. He resentfully lives among the kinsmen of his motherland, reminding himself that his maternal kinsmen are not as warlike and fierce as his clan, and he faults them for their preference of negotiation and avoidance of bloodshed.

## Pride and Ambition

Okonkwo takes pride in his achievements. Not only has he proven himself as a fierce warrior, but he has also climbed Umuofia's social ladder faster than other tribesmen. Okonkwo's pride also makes him disdainful to those who do not live up to his standards. Okonkwo's disenchantment at his father's behaviour and his adoption of aggressive, manly traits points to his ambition of becoming head of his tribe. Nwoye's lack of masculine qualities leads Okonkwo to be aggressive towards Nwoye. Okonkwo's exile to Mbanta also deals a serious blow to his pride. When he returns to Umuofia he wants to restore his pride by defending his clan against European influence. Okonkwo eventually resorts to violence to defend his pride, and this leads to his tragic downfall.

## Free Will and Fate

After his exile, Okonkwo believes his chi has turned against him. He refuses to see that his actions and punishment reflect his fatal flaw of hubris, and loses the opportunity of redemption while in exile. Likewise, the Ibo do not reflect on the cause of their kinsmen's desertion to Christianity, and the shortcomings of their social and religious order make members susceptible to the attraction of a more compassionate religion. The Ibo's inability to adjust their traditions to save themselves make them vulnerable to British authority and colonial imposition.

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## Tribal Beliefs and Customs

Achebe objectively presents some of the weaknesses of the Ibo tradition. This does not justify colonial domination nor diminishes the tragedy of the cultural erasure that occurred. While the cohesion of the Ibo society is marked by the observance of its rituals and traditions, Achebe shows the violence, dehumanization, and discrimination that vulnerable groups experience in Umuofia due to the rigid adherence to tradition and superstition. Obierika's questioning of some customs suggests that many laws are enacted from a sense of duty rather than a belief in their justice. The cultural demand for conformity places a huge burden on individuals, like Okonkwo and Nwoye, who must reckon with the sometimes heartless will of the gods.

## Sense of Justice

The Ibo people have different institutions and traditions for dispensing justice. Okonkwo is exiled under this tribal legal system and is brought back after seven years. He kills his adopted son, Ikemefuna, under this system. However, with the arrival of the English, the Ibo system seems barbaric in comparison. Their traditions fall apart due to the fast institutionalized religion and governance of the white people.

## Language Differences

The English language is termed superior through Mr. Brown and other missionaries who speak English. English is spread as a medium of religious preaching and administrative work. Whenever a local wants to assert his superiority, he speaks English. However, through the inclusion of proverbs, folktales, and songs translated from the Ibo language, Achebe conveys the beauty of the Ibo language and shows that the Ibo language is too complex for direct translation into English. Also, the Ibo culture cannot be understood within the framework of European colonialist values.

## Generational Divide

Okonkwo feels ashamed of his father and his son. Unlike Okonkwo, Unoka is not a warrior, nor has he distinguished himself as a man in any other way. Unoka's lack of drive is shameful, and Okonkwo dismisses his father as a coward. Nwoye resists his father's expectation that he become an accomplished warrior. He also feels drawn to his mother's stories, which Okonkwo sees as effeminate. Eventually, Nwoye escapes his father's expectations by running away and converting to Christianity.

Adapted from: <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/things/themes/>  
<https://www.prestwickhouse.com/blog/post/2018/04/how-to-teach-things-fall-apart>