

## THE DILEMMA OF PRESERVING OR PROGRESSING IN ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

*Achebe'in Things Fall Apart Adlı Romanında  
Muhafazakarlık ve Değişim İkilemi*

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**ABSTRACT:** In his seminal work *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe highlights the tension between tradition and modernity as a dominant theme that reflects the complex struggles faced by individuals and societies in the midst of change. Achebe's portrayal of the Igbo community's challenges resonates beyond its setting, speaking to broader societal debates on identity, cultural evolution, and the complexities of historical transformation. In this respect, this paper delves into the multifaceted exploration of the theme, investigating characters' attitudes towards change and progress while highlighting the profound consequences of either upholding traditional values or embracing modernity. Through a close analysis of key characters, their interactions, and their choices, the paper uncovers the intricate balance between the desire to preserve cultural heritage and the inevitable pull of progress. By examining the characters' dilemmas, this paper sheds light on the universal human struggle between the comfort of established traditions and the allure of embracing new ways of life. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of Achebe's narrative artistry and the thematic relevance of *Things Fall Apart* in contemporary discussions on cultural dynamics and societal change.

**Keywords:** Achebe, preservation, progression, culture, tradition

**ÖZ:** Chinua Achebe, önemli eseri *Things Fall Apart*'ta, değişimin eşliğindeki bireylerin ve toplumların karşılaştığı karmaşık mücadeleleri yansıtan baskın bir tema olarak gelenek ve modernite arasındaki gerilimi vurgular. Achebe'nin Igbo toplumunun yaşadığı zorlukları betimlediği eser, bulunduğu ortamın ötesine geçerek kimlik, kültürel evrim ve tarihsel dönüşümün karmaşıklığı üzerine daha geniş toplumsal tartışmalara değinmektedir. Bu bağlamda, bu makale konunun çok yönlü bir incelemesini yapmakta, karakterlerin değişim ve ilerlemeye karşı tutumlarını araştırırken, geleneksel değerleri korumanın ya da modernliği benimsemenin yarattığı ağır sonuçları vurgulamaktadır. Ana karakterlerin, etkileşimlerinin ve

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seçimlerinin ayrıntılı bir analizi yoluyla bu makale, kültürel mirası koruma arzusu ile ilerlemenin kaçınılmaz çekiciliği arasındaki karmaşık dengeyi ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Bu makale, karakterlerin ikilemlerini inceleyerek, yerleşik geleneklerin rahatlığı ile yeni yaşam biçimlerini benimsemenin cazibesi arasındaki evrensel insan mücadelesine de ışık tutmaktadır. Bunu yaparken, Achebe'nin anlatı sanatının ve *Things Fall Apart*'ın kültürel dinamikler ve toplumsal değişim hakkındaki çağdaş tartışmalarla tematik ilgisinin daha derinlemesine anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Achebe, muhafaza, gelişim, kültür, gelenek

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### Introduction

Looking at the well-known intellectuals of colonized societies who can lead the society, we see that most of them were educated in schools in the West. After going to the West and completing their higher education, students who come to prominence through an education process designed and implemented by the colonizer and conducted in the language of the colonizer return to their countries and develop a discourse against the negative effects of the colonial period on their cultures with an anti-colonialist attitude. These liberal realists contend objectively that the present adverse circumstances of their people are a direct consequence of the past policies of the colonizers, which were undeniably unjust. However, they acknowledge that it is impossible to reverse the current situation, which has developed over centuries of societal interaction, without a contemporary attitude. In addition, some scholars argue that it is impractical to discuss homogeneity in an age of widespread communication, transportation, migration, and human mobility. The most recent advances in science, technology, health, medicine, economics, and finance are not preserved in African local languages, but rather in the global languages of the West. Therefore, both individuals and societies must rely on this knowledge base to ensure survival and economic growth and development. Salman Rushdie, in his 1992 book *Imaginary Homelands*, a collection of essays, argues that instead of simply ignoring and rejecting the English language, writers should use it to find solutions to the problems facing newly decolonized countries. Rushdie believes that “the conquest and possession of English can complete the process of our endeavor to free ourselves” (1992, p. 17). In his article *English and the African Writer* published in *Transition*, Chinua Achebe discusses his stance on the English language, stating that it may seem like a betrayal and cause feelings of guilt when one abandons their mother tongue for another. However, for him, there is no other option as he was given the English language and intends to utilize it (1997, p. 342). Most theorists, thinkers, intellectuals, and writers of the post-colonial period, including

Chinua Achebe, concur that colonialism, as a form of expansionist thought put into practice, utilized and moulded the education systems of the colonized countries to guarantee longevity. Richard L. Allen argues that colonialism inflicted rapid and catastrophic damage on Africa, comparable to an uncontrollable wildfire, with education serving as the primary tool deployed for this purpose. Subsequently, the same education was deployed as a weapon to resist colonialism (Allen, 2001, p. 17). These intellectuals, who use education as a tool, write about the disintegration of the political, economic, and cultural aspects of colonized countries caused by European civilization. This occurred after the territories were physically vacated, especially following the Second World War. Their literature also discusses the destruction of the political, economic, and cultural aspects of the same countries resulting from European civilization's withdrawal. While some argue for the complete rejection of the European civilization's legacy, others contend that the civilization has both caused harm and contributed positively, and that, given centuries of interaction, it is implausible to reject it entirely. Chinua Achebe's statement "A human is human because of other humans" (2009, p. 166) could suggest that Achebe is aligned with those who support the second perspective.

Born in 1930 to a Protestant family in British-colonized Nigeria, Achebe grew up with both the Protestant culture taught in the evangelical schools established by the British and his own local culture, the Igbo culture (Ohaeto, 1997). Nigeria, a British colony, gained its independence in 1960. According to the latest data of *The World Fact Book*, with a population of over 230 million, 53.5 per cent of Nigeria's population is Muslim, 46 per cent is Christian and the rest is made up of local beliefs. In the country, whose official language is English, around 500 local languages are spoken, especially Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and Fulani. During his university years, Achebe studied English literature. Influenced by writers such as Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene, who portrayed Africans in general and Nigeria and its people in particular from an Orientalist perspective, as uncivilized savages, Achebe created three successive novels that opposed the stereotypical image of Africans presented by these men (Ohaeto, 1997). The first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, was published in 1958 and depicts the period before Nigeria was colonized by the British, when settlers and missionaries were arriving. The second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, published in 1960, portrays Nigeria's social situation before independence. The third novel, *Arrow of God*, published in 1964, focuses on the colonial period preceding *No Longer at Ease*. John Povey adds *A Man of the People*, which was

published in 1966 and is a novel about Nigeria's post-independence period, to this trio. He argues that Achebe's four novels depict the cultural history of Nigeria from its colonization by the British until the 1970s. (1971, p. 26).

When Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958, African countries were struggling to achieve their independence. These endeavours were intensified not only in the political sphere but also in the cultural sphere. Societies that had been subjected to economic and cultural exploitation by Europe for a long time and had therefore been disorganized were beginning to challenge the European ideology by claiming that from now on they would decide their own destiny within the framework of their traditions and customs. On the other hand, the superstructure that has been created by the long-standing dialectic of exploitation stood as an obstacle in front of the societies, especially in front of the intellectuals and scholars who studied in the schools of the colonialists and endeavored to guide the society. These intellectuals, cultured by the West's education system based on *open-system*<sup>1</sup> and cognitive foundations and the sociological, economic and cultural wealth and progress that emerged as the outputs of this system, underline that the West is able to continue its exploitation by taking advantage of the inadequacies revealed by their *semi-open*<sup>2</sup> and/or *closed-system*<sup>3</sup> and behaviorist-based education system. They argue that what they have to do is to adopt a situation defined as *aufhebung*<sup>4</sup> from the clash of both cultures. It can be argued that Achebe is one of these intellectuals as well. Like many postcolonial writers, Achebe, as well, transformed Nigeria's pre-colonial, during colonial, and post-colonial eras into fictional narratives. The British initially colonized Nigeria, and subsequently dominated its institutions, restructuring them to suit their own interests. The most significant organizations that have undergone restructuring are those connected to education and belief systems.

*Things Fall Apart* explores the social structure during the early stages of British colonialism and how it responds to an exploitative culture. It depicts the struggles of the Nigerian people as they navigate the introduction of a

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<sup>1</sup> The system that is consisted of input, process, output, feedback (IPOF).

<sup>2</sup> The system that has input, process, output; but which lacks feedback.

<sup>3</sup> Although it is thought that there are enough inputs and outputs, it is actually a system that is not enough and does not have a feedback element.

<sup>4</sup> In his 'Science of Logic', Hegel explores the concept of 'aufhebung', which is often translated as 'sublation'. This term encapsulates the dialectical process of negation, preservation, and transformation, where contradictory elements are reconciled and elevated to a higher level of synthesis" (Hegel, 2010, p. XVII).

new way of life imposed by the colonizer during the pre-colonial and early colonial periods of the 1900s. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe presents the traditional African culture framework by depicting the lifestyle of the Igbo tribe, a significant community in the Nigerian ethnic diversity. The novel provides a satisfying understanding of the pre-colonial social structures of Nigeria on a micro level and Africa on a macro level. On one hand, Achebe presents the traditions and rituals unique to societies with tribal structures in a clear and concise manner. On the other hand, he endeavors to deconstruct the stereotypical portrayal of Africa and Africans. The novel portrays the period of transition before the traditions, customs and sociological structure of the Igbo tribe, which have remained unchanged for centuries, encounter a cultured yet ruthless, innovative yet expansionist, and exploratory but dominant civilization that has achieved its present state by constant changes.

*Things Fall Apart* holds a paramount position in both literature and cultural discourse. David Whittaker et al. writes “Things Fall Apart is not only the most celebrated Nigerian novel ever published, it is also the most widely read and studied work of African fiction, both abroad and throughout the continent itself” (2007, p. XI) The novel’s poignant exploration of intricate themes and vivid depiction of the clash between tradition and modernity continue to resonate deeply with readers of all generations. Though Richard Begam asserts that “the long view it [the novel] adopts suggests that Achebe’s own position on the modernization of Africa is, at the very least, complicated” (1997, p. 397), at its core, the novel examines the fundamental tension between preserving time-honored values and the allure of progress. In a changing world, individuals and societies face the perpetual struggle to balance tradition with modernity. As Diana Rhoads underlines, “Achebe appears to have tested Igbo culture against the goals of modern liberal democracy and to have set out to show how the Igbo meet those standards” (2014, p. 61). The characters in *Things Fall Apart* grapple with this quandary, navigating their own paths through a shifting cultural landscape. So, this paper explores the nuanced attitudes exhibited by these characters towards change and progress, delving into the profound consequences that arise from their choices. It analyses the attitudes, decisions and outcomes of the characters. It also aims to unravel the complex interplay between the desire to uphold ancient traditions and the irresistible momentum of progress. By conducting this investigation, we intend to explore Achebe’s skillful portrayal of the human struggle between the comfort of familiarity and the lure of novelty.

### **Traditional Values and Cultural Context of the Igbo Tribe**

The cultural setting of the Igbo society in *Things Fall Apart* is vividly portrayed through a tapestry of rituals, superstitions, and traditional practices that shape the lives of its inhabitants. Rituals play a significant role in the daily lives of the Igbo people. For instance, the Feast of the New Yam is a celebration that marks the beginning of the harvest season. Achebe highlights the importance of this ritual when he writes, "The Feast of the New Yam was approaching, and Umuofia was in a festival mood" (Achebe, 1958, p. 32). The feast not only showcases the agricultural prowess of the community but also underscores the communal bonds that are strengthened through shared festivities. Superstitions also feature prominently in the cultural fabric of the Igbo society. One example is the fear of the *evil forest*. When the *egwugwu*, the masked ancestral spirits, emerge during the annual ceremony, the villagers exhibit a mix of awe and trepidation. This is evident when Achebe writes, "The *egwugwu* house was the most powerful in the clan. It was so powerful that an *osu*, an outcast, could neither enter nor look at it" (Achebe, 1958, p. 91). The belief in the power of these spirits reflects the deep-rooted superstitions that influence social norms and interactions. Moreover, the practice of *chi*, a personal god or destiny, is integral to the Igbo worldview. Okonkwo's inner conflict regarding his *chi*'s role in shaping his destiny is exemplified in his thoughts: "Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer" (Achebe, 1958, p. 27). This internal struggle underscores the way in which cultural beliefs intertwine with personal identity and actions. Furthermore, the oracle of the hills and caves, *Agbala*, serves as a conduit between the spiritual and physical realms. The oracle's pronouncements are taken with utmost seriousness. As Achebe notes, "The priestess in white sat with her legs astride a narrow wooden stool... The voice of the priestess trembled with anger as she asked, 'Who is *Agbala*?''" (Achebe, 1958, p. 66). The oracle's words carry immense authority and influence, shaping decisions and actions in the community.

Moreover, exploring the various cultural elements depicted in *Things Fall Apart* provides a comprehensive understanding of the intricate society presented in the novel and the profound ways in which tradition, beliefs, and practices shape the characters' lives and decisions. The Igbo society exhibits a well-defined social hierarchy, with titles serving as crucial indicators of an individual's status and accomplishments. Okonkwo's attainment of the title *Okafo* is a reflection of his success as a warrior and his ability to amass wealth and honor (Achebe, 1958, p. 27). Moreover, the novel underscores

the significance of marriage and family within Igbo culture, delving into practices like polygamy, bride-price negotiations, and the roles of men and women within the family unit, all of which offer insights into the dynamics of relationships (Achebe, 1958, p. 16). The Igbo society's unique justice and legal systems are portrayed through the *egwugwu*, who act as judges to address disputes and offenses, as seen when they convene to settle a marital conflict (Achebe, 1958, p. 96). The tradition of oral storytelling is interwoven into the narrative, with myths, folktales, and proverbs capturing the essence of Igbo wisdom and cultural values (Achebe, 1958, p. 7). Ancestral spirits represented by the *egwugwu* play a significant role in Igbo spirituality, offering insights into the religious practices of the community through characters' reverence and rituals (Achebe, 1958, p. 91). Gender roles and responsibilities are distinct, with women primarily managing domestic tasks while men engage in agricultural and warrior activities, a differentiation evident in Okonkwo's interactions with his wives and daughter (Achebe, 1958, p. 23). Furthermore, proverbs and sayings are fundamental components of Igbo communication, conveying cultural wisdom and values, as exemplified by the proverb "If a child washed his hands, he could eat with kings", illustrating the importance of cleanliness and decorum (Achebe, 1958, p. 7). These elements illuminate the intricate ways in which tradition, spirituality, and communal practices interweave to define the lives of the characters and the society as a whole.

The main characters in *Things Fall Apart* are introduced with distinct personas that reflect their initial strong attachments to traditional values within the Igbo society. The protagonist, Okonkwo, embodies the epitome of adhering to traditional values. His character is introduced with a focus on his relentless pursuit of success and his aversion to any semblance of weakness. Achebe writes, "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements" (Achebe, 1958, p. 3). This introduction underscores Okonkwo's reputation as a warrior and his determination to rise above the shortcomings he perceives in his father's character, thereby embodying the ideals of strength and resilience. Another character, Obierika, represents an individual who values tradition while maintaining a reflective and pragmatic stance. Obierika is portrayed as a close friend of Okonkwo who recognizes the importance of communal bonds. He remarks, "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." (Achebe, 1958, p. 207). Obierika's critique of the clan's treatment of Ezeudu, the elder who died, highlights his reverence for traditional practices

and his concern for the community's well-being. Furthermore, Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, initially demonstrates attachment to his father's traditional values. As a young boy, he is influenced by Okonkwo's stern demeanor and holds onto his father's expectations. Achebe notes, "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" (Achebe, 1958, p. 53). This passage underscores Nwoye's inner conflict between conforming to his father's expectations and seeking solace in his mother's nurturing narratives. In conclusion, the introduction of main characters like Okonkwo, Obierika, and Nwoye highlights their initial attachment to traditional values. Okonkwo's pursuit of strength and honor, Obierika's reverence for communal ties, and Nwoye's struggle to reconcile conflicting influences all serve to establish the complex interplay between individual identity and cultural traditions. Through these characters, Achebe lays the foundation for exploring the theme of tradition versus modernity in Igbo society.

#### **The Intrusion of Modernity**

The arrival of European colonialism in *Things Fall Apart* brings about a profound transformation in the Igbo society, marked by the introduction of modern elements such as Christianity, education, and new social structures. The incursion of colonialism is exemplified by the presence of Christian missionaries who aim to spread their religious beliefs among the Igbo people. Achebe portrays this encounter through the character of Mr. Brown, a missionary who initially takes a conciliatory approach. In reference to Mr. Brown, Achebe writes, "He walked to Amalinze the Cat, a famous wrestler who was unbeaten for seven years. [...] And so the clan was delighted and thought that the new religion had come to stay" (Achebe, 1958, p. 143). Mr. Brown's initial approach of understanding and tolerance earns him the respect and curiosity of the villagers, leading to a temporary coexistence of traditional beliefs and the new faith. Education, another modern element, is introduced through the building of a school by the missionaries. The role of education in colonization is multifaceted and complex, encompassing various strategies employed by colonial powers to assert dominance, control, and cultural influence over colonized territories. Education was a key tool for shaping perceptions, controlling populations, and consolidating colonial rule. The school offers literacy and the promise of new opportunities, particularly for the younger generation. Achebe portrays this development when he describes the school's impact on Nwoye: "His father [...] was pleased, and he hoped that he would grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his father's household when he was dead and gone to join the

ancestors” (Achebe, 1958, p. 144). Nwoye’s pursuit of education symbolizes a departure from traditional roles and an embrace of modern learning. Furthermore, the imposition of new social structures becomes evident with the establishment of a court that enforces colonial laws. The District Commissioner, representing colonial authority, seeks to maintain control and impose European norms. This is demonstrated through the arrest of leaders during the gathering at the marketplace: “The court messengers came down and they arrested them and tied them up and led them away” (Achebe, 1958, p. 190). The intrusion of the court dismantles the Igbo society’s traditional system of justice and governance. The arrival of European colonialism in *Things Fall Apart* ushers in a wave of modern elements that profoundly impact the Igbo society. The introduction of Christianity, education, and new social structures creates a dynamic interplay between traditional values and the allure of progress. As the characters navigate this changing landscape, Achebe highlights the complex tensions and consequences that arise from the clash between tradition and modernity. As it has also been stressed by Morrison, Achebe aims to portray in his novel that dialogue, negotiation, and the attainment of societal equilibrium are of great significance within the Igbo communities he depicts. “In terms of characterization, he presents a picture of harmony in diversity” (2018, p. 17).

The initial resistance and skepticism towards modernity in *Things Fall Apart* are exemplified through the reactions of characters like Okonkwo and the broader clan as they encounter the new elements introduced by European colonialism. Okonkwo, as a staunch defender of traditional values, is profoundly skeptical of the changes brought about by the missionaries. His reaction to his son Nwoye’s conversion to Christianity reflects his deep-seated mistrust of these new ideas. Achebe writes, “He had felt for the boy, who was not as strong as Okonkwo. He knew that Nwoye was not made for great things. He preferred the stories about his mother” (Achebe, 1958, p. 154). Okonkwo’s disappointment in Nwoye’s conversion stems from his belief that Christianity weakens his son’s connection to their ancestral heritage and values. The clan’s collective resistance is depicted when the villagers burn down the church, an act led by Okonkwo. This symbolizes the community’s rejection of the incursion of foreign beliefs. Achebe narrates, “They set fire to it and the flames leaped into the sky. [...] The people stood round, waiting” (Achebe, 1958, p. 183). The destruction of the church exemplifies the clan’s assertion of their autonomy and their determination to protect their cultural integrity against the intrusion of modernity. Furthermore, the clan’s response to the District Commissioner’s attempts to

control them showcases their initial defiance. When the Commissioner arrives to arrest leaders during a gathering, the villagers resist and respond with defiance. Achebe notes, "The crowd began to break up. They stood in small groups, murmuring and wondering what was going to happen" (Achebe, 1958, p. 190). This scene illustrates the collective pushback against the imposition of foreign authority and signals the Igbo people's reluctance to abandon their traditional norms.

### **Attitudes Towards Change**

Characters who embrace modernity and those who remain committed to tradition in *Things Fall Apart* offer a rich exploration of the factors influencing their choices. Nwoye, representing the younger generation, and Obierika, a close friend of Okonkwo, exemplify these contrasting perspectives. Nwoye's transition towards modernity is influenced by personal experiences that lead him to question traditional practices. Achebe portrays Nwoye's journey when he writes, "Nwoye had felt for the first time a snapping inside him. He had heard that twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest" (Achebe, 1958, p. 66). Nwoye's discovery of the harsh consequences of twin infanticide challenges his perception of the clan's values and contributes to his openness to new ideas. Generational gaps further contribute to Nwoye's shift. The missionaries provide an alternative to the rigid expectations of his father, Okonkwo. Achebe notes, "The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul" (Achebe, 1958, p. 147). Nwoye finds solace in the Christian teachings, which offer a different perspective on forgiveness and love, resonating with his longing for acceptance and compassion. In contrast, Obierika remains rooted in tradition due to his understanding of the cultural and communal significance. His skepticism towards the new faith is evident in his dialogue with Mr. Brown: "You say that there is one God. You tell us that Chukwu sent his son to die for us. That is a good message. But we also have our own message. We believe that the men of the clan are the sons of God" (Achebe, 1958, p. 148). Obierika's attachment to traditional beliefs is reinforced by his deep connection to the community's collective identity. Exposure to new ideas plays a pivotal role in shaping these characters' paths. Nwoye's interaction with the missionaries introduces him to an alternate worldview that resonates with his internal conflicts. Obierika, despite his critical stance on Christianity, acknowledges the appeal of education and change. Achebe writes, "Obierika had been deeply shocked and even now he could still remember how foolish he had felt" (Achebe, 1958, p. 144). This moment of

reflection reveals Obierika's openness to certain modern elements, tempered by his reverence for tradition. Nwoye and Obierika in *Things Fall Apart* exemplify characters who embrace modernity and tradition, respectively. Their motivations are deeply influenced by personal experiences, generational dynamics, and exposure to new ideas. Through their perspectives, Achebe skillfully explores the complexities of cultural transition and the multifaceted nature of individual responses to change.

### **Consequences of Choices**

The choices characters make to either preserve tradition or pursue modernity in *Things Fall Apart* carry significant repercussions that shape both their individual destinies and the larger community. The downfall of Okonkwo serves as a cautionary tale about the perils of clinging excessively to tradition. Okonkwo's rigid adherence to traditional masculine values leads him to reject anything he perceives as weak, including his father's legacy. This determination drives him to accumulate wealth, power, and honor. However, his obsession with preserving his image as a strong and successful man leads to a tragic downfall. When Okonkwo inadvertently kills Ezeudu's son during the funeral, he is exiled from the clan as punishment. This act exposes the fatal consequences of unchecked pride and inflexibility in the face of changing circumstances. The transformation of the community due to modern influences is exemplified by the clan's response to the introduction of Christianity and European colonialism. The Christian missionaries and colonial administrators impose new beliefs, legal systems, and social hierarchies that challenge traditional norms. As Achebe writes, "The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia" (Achebe, 1958, p. 152). This passage underscores the dual impact of modernity: economic opportunities alongside the erosion of cultural cohesion. The clash between tradition and modernity results in significant tension and disintegration within the community. As the Igbo people grapple with the allure of progress and the loss of their ancestral values, divisions arise. The scene in which the clan burns down the church reflects this conflict, marking a pivotal moment of resistance against the encroachment of foreign beliefs (Achebe, 1958, p. 183). The gradual erosion of traditional customs and communal bonds culminates in a profound sense of loss and fragmentation. In conclusion, *Things Fall Apart* illustrates the profound repercussions of characters' choices to uphold tradition or embrace modernity. Okonkwo's tragic downfall serves as a warning against rigid adherence to tradition, while the

transformation of the community reflects the complexities of adapting to modern influences. Through these narratives, Achebe underscores the delicate balance between cultural heritage and societal evolution, providing a poignant exploration of the consequences that emerge when these forces collide.

### **The Ambivalence of Progress**

Instances of inner conflict regarding the stance on tradition and modernity are evident in *Things Fall Apart*, showcasing the characters' struggles to navigate the evolving cultural landscape. One such instance is observed in Nwoye's internal turmoil as he grapples with the conflict between his father's traditional values and the new ideas introduced by Christianity. Achebe captures this turmoil: "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" (Achebe, 1958, p. 53). Nwoye's yearning for the nurturing stories of his mother and his attraction to the gentler teachings of Christianity illustrate the complex tension he experiences between adhering to tradition and embracing modernity. Furthermore, Obierika's ambivalence highlights the nuanced critique of both traditional and modern elements. While he values the clan's traditions, he also recognizes the potential benefits of modern ideas. Achebe writes, "What is good among one people is an abomination with others. [...] What is good in one place is bad in another place" (Achebe, 1958, p. 176). Obierika's contemplation underscores the relativity of cultural norms and the complexities of evaluating traditional practices critically. Regarding this ambivalence, Abiola Irele states that Achebe's mind, as well, "hovers between fascination and unbelief, between an impulse toward an embrace of the cultural values suggested by his imaginative exploration of setting and narrative elaboration of context, and a positivist outlook inseparable from a liberated consciousness" (2000, p. 17).

The egwugwu ceremony provides another moment of ambivalence. While the ritual is steeped in tradition and ancestral reverence, it also embodies an inherent theatricality. Achebe describes, "The spirits which were in those images were not to be trifled with, and if they were made angry they would visit destruction upon the offender, as was the case with Unoka, who had died the death of a coward" (Achebe, 1958, p. 87). The tension between the solemnity of tradition and the theatricality of the performance hints at the complexities of adapting rituals to changing circumstances. Nwoye's struggle with his father's values and Obierika's contemplative stance demonstrate the multifaceted nature of these conflicts. The ambivalence surrounding practices like the egwugwu ceremony further

emphasizes the intricate interplay between the preservation of tradition and the critique of both traditional and modern elements. The erosion of cultural identity due to the clash between tradition and modernity is a central theme in *Things Fall Apart*, and characters grapple with this shifting cultural landscape, leading to profound impacts on their sense of self.

The erosion of cultural identity is evident in the character of Nwoye, who undergoes a transformative process as he embraces Christianity. Achebe portrays this transformation: “The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul—the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed” (Achebe, 1958, p. 147). Nwoye’s adoption of Christianity offers him a new narrative that resonates with his internal conflicts, challenging the foundation of his Igbo cultural identity. Similarly, the character of Okonkwo grapples with the erosion of his cultural identity as he confronts the encroachment of colonialism. His frustration and despair are palpable when he realizes the diminished respect for traditional authority: “That was the kind of language that men use when they are afraid. At this rate, the clan would no longer speak like one people” (Achebe, 1958, p. 180). The disruption of social norms and the undermining of his sense of authority lead Okonkwo to question his place in a society undergoing rapid transformation. The impact of the shifting cultural landscape is also illustrated through the demise of the Igbo way of life. The traditional festivals, rituals, and practices that once defined the community become marginalized in the face of modernity. Achebe portrays this shift when he describes the Feast of the New Yam after the arrival of Christianity: “The Feast of the New Yam came and passed, and still the rains did not break” (Achebe, 1958, p. 151). The absence of the usual celebrations signifies the fading significance of age-old traditions in the wake of new belief systems.

### **Conclusion**

*Things Fall Apart* is one of the first novels in which the African culture and way of life and the relationship of the African people with Western civilization are described from the point of view of an African. Readers who know Africa and Africans through the descriptions in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* (1939) have the opportunity to read and evaluate Africa and Africans from an insider’s point of view for the first time. The novel depicts how, in the late 19th century, the British, whose worldviews were completely different, came to Nigeria and, with their education system

and religion, divided and changed the Igbo tribe on a micro scale, and the whole of Africa and its way of life on a macro scale.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe masterfully weaves a tapestry of characters and their intricate responses to the clash between tradition and modernity. Through their nuanced attitudes and choices, Achebe presents a profound exploration of the human condition in the face of evolving cultural dynamics and societal change. Throughout the narrative, characters like Okonkwo and Nwoye embody the spectrum of reactions to the tension between preserving tradition and embracing modernity. Okonkwo's tragic downfall serves as a cautionary tale, illustrating the dangers of rigidly adhering to tradition without allowing for adaptation. Nwoye's journey, on the other hand, represents the complex internal struggle faced by individuals as they grapple with conflicting influences. Their choices reflect the multifaceted nature of the human experience as individuals navigate the currents of change. The universal relevance of this theme extends far beyond the confines of the novel's Igbo setting. *Things Fall Apart* resonates with broader discussions on cultural dynamics and societal shifts across time and place. The tensions between the familiar and the unknown, the comfort of heritage and the allure of progress, are inherent to human societies in flux. Achebe's narrative offers a profound exploration of the complexities arising from the collision of tradition and modernity, offering insights that transcend cultural boundaries.

As we reflect on the enduring significance of *Things Fall Apart*, we recognize its capacity to serve as a mirror to our own world. The eternal struggle between preserving heritage and embracing progress persists as societies navigate the complexities of globalization, technology, and cultural exchange. Achebe's work reminds us that this struggle is not limited to a specific time or location but is a timeless exploration of the human experience itself. Studying the tension between tradition and modernity through literature, as exemplified by *Things Fall Apart*, holds immense significance in our pursuit of understanding the complexities of human existence. Literature serves as a bridge that transports us into the lives of characters and cultures, offering insights into the challenges of navigating change and preserving cultural authenticity. Furthermore, literature encourages an ongoing dialogue about the relevance of the tradition-versus-modernity theme in contemporary society. In a world characterized by rapid technological advancements, globalization, and cultural exchange, the questions raised by Achebe's work become even more pertinent. How do we honor our cultural heritage while adapting to change? How can we navigate

progress without sacrificing authenticity? These are questions that resonate across cultures and time periods. As we engage with literature that grapples with the tension between tradition and modernity, we are invited to reflect on our own lives and the world around us. This reflection is not confined to the pages of a book; it extends to the choices we make as individuals and as a society. Through ongoing dialogue and introspection, we can draw wisdom from the past to inform our approach to the future. A work like *Things Fall Apart* reminds us that the journey of balancing tradition and modernity is a universal pursuit, and literature provides us with the invaluable opportunity to engage in this exploration together.

In conclusion, *Things Fall Apart* remains a poignant reflection of the delicate balance between tradition and modernity. Achebe's portrayal of characters' attitudes and choices resonates universally, highlighting the complexities of cultural evolution and societal transformation. As we engage with this timeless narrative, we are reminded that the tension between preserving heritage and embracing progress continues to shape the human story, offering us a profound lens through which to understand our world and ourselves. The novel highlights the vulnerability of a culture lacking an institutionalized sociological structure and adhering to an outdated tradition, such as polytheistic faith or sacrificing children in accordance with this belief, oppressing women, allowing men to take multiple wives, and condemning and killing twins at birth. The relationship between personal traits and the adoption or rejection of colonizers' values is complex and influenced by various factors, including individual characteristics, cultural context, and the dynamics of colonial encounters. People in colonized societies exhibited diverse responses to the values imposed by colonizers, and these responses were shaped by a range of personal traits. Therefore, it can be argued that Achebe stresses the importance of cultural adaptability. Cultures that are resistant to change and fail to keep up with the zeitgeist are unable to compete with those that have successfully embraced change.

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