

Things Fall Apart

Supplemental Reading Chs. 6-8

Chapter 6

This chapter introduces a much-discussed aspect of Ibo belief. As in most pre-modern cultures, the majority of children died in early childhood. If a series of such deaths took place in a family it was believed that the same wicked spirit was being born and dying over and over again, spitefully grieving its parents. They tended to be apprehensive about new children until they seemed to be likely to survive, thus proving themselves not to be feared ogbanje.

Chapter 7

"Foo-foo" is pounded yam, the traditional staple of the Ibo diet. How does the village react to the coming of the locusts? Achebe is doubtless stressing the contrast with other cultures here, familiar to African readers from the Bible, in which locusts are invariably a terrible plague.

Most traditional cultures have considered twins magical or cursed. Twins are in fact unusually common among the Ibo, and some subgroups value them highly. However, the people of Umuofia do not. Note how the introduction of this bit of knowledge is introduced on the heels of Ikemefuna's death. Nwoye serves as a point of view character to criticize some of the more negative aspects of Umuofia culture. This incident will have a powerful influence on his reaction to changes in the culture later.

Chapter 8

Bride-price is the converse of dowry. Common in many African cultures, it involves the bridegroom's family paying substantial wealth in cash or goods for the privilege of marrying a young woman. Note again the emphasis on differing customs, this time as it applies to palm-wine tapping.

Young women were considered marriageable in their mid-teens. Why do you think this attitude arose? It is worth noting that European women commonly married between 15 and 18 in earlier times. There is nothing uniquely African about these attitudes.

Spark Notes Analysis

Although traditional Igbo culture is fairly democratic in nature, it is also profoundly patriarchal. Wife-beating is an accepted practice. Moreover, femininity is associated with weakness while masculinity is associated with strength. It is no coincidence that the word that refers to a titleless man also means "woman." A man is not believed to be "manly" if he cannot control his women. Okonkwo frequently beats his wives, and the only emotion he allows himself to display is anger. He does not particularly like feasts, because the idleness that they involve makes him feel

emasculated. Okonkwo's frustration at this idleness causes him to act violently, breaking the spirit of the celebration.

Okonkwo's extremely overactive desire to conquer and subdue, along with his profound hatred of all things feminine, is suggestive of impotence. Though he has children, Okonkwo is never compared to anything thriving or organic; instead, Achebe always associates him with fire, which consumes but does not beget. The incident in which he tries to shoot Ekwefi with his gun is likewise suggestive of impotence. After Ekwefi hints at Okonkwo's inability to shoot properly, Okonkwo proves this inability, failing to hit Ekwefi. Impotence, whether or not it is an actual physical condition for him, seems to be a characteristic that is related to Okonkwo's chauvinistic behavior.

Okonkwo disobeys the authority and advice of a clan elder in killing Ikemefuna. His actions are too close to killing a kinsman, which is a grave sin in Igbo culture. Okonkwo is so afraid of looking weak that he is willing to come close to violating tribal law in order to prove otherwise. No one would have thought that Okonkwo was weak if he had stayed in the village. In fact, Obierika's opinion on the matter suggests that doing so would have been considered the more appropriate action. Instead, Okonkwo's actions seriously damage both his relationship with Nwoye and Nwoye's allegiance to Igbo society.

Nwoye shows promise because he voices chauvinist opinions, but his comments are really aimed at Okonkwo. In fact, Nwoye loves women's stories and is pleased when his mother or Okonkwo's other wives ask him to do things for them. He also seeks comfort in his mother's hut after Ikemefuna's death. Nwoye's questioning of Ikemefuna's death and of the practice of throwing away newborn twins is understandable: Obierika, too, frequently questions tradition. In fact, Obierika refused to accompany the other men to kill Ikemefuna, and Okonkwo points out that Obierika seems to question the Oracle. Obierika also has reservations about the village's practice of tapping trees. Okonkwo, on the other hand, accepts all of his clan's laws and traditions unquestioningly.

Interestingly, Obierika's manliness is never questioned. The fact that Obierika is skeptical of some Igbo practices makes us regard Nwoye's skepticism in a different light. We understand that, in Umuofia, manhood does not require the denigration of women. Like Nwoye, Ikemefuna is not close to his biological father. Rather, his primary emotional attachments to his natal village are to his mother and little sister. Although he is not misogynistic like Okonkwo, Ikemefuna is the perfect clansman. He eagerly takes part in the community celebrations and integrates himself into Okonkwo's family. Okonkwo and Ikemefuna love one another as father and son, and Ikemefuna is a good older brother to Nwoye. Most important, he is protective rather than critical. He does not allow Nwoye and his brothers to tell their mother that Obiageli broke her water pot when she was showing off—he does not want her to be punished. Ikemefuna illustrates that manliness does not preclude gentleness and affection.

In calling himself a “shivering old woman,” Okonkwo associates weakness with femininity. Although he denigrates his emotional attachment to Ikemefuna, he seeks comfort in his affectionate friendship with Obierika. Ezinma is likewise a source of great comfort to him. Because she understands him, she does not address his sorrow directly; rather, she urges him to eat. For all of Okonkwo’s chauvinism, Ezinma is his favorite child. Okonkwo’s frequently voiced desire that Ezinma were a boy seems to suggest that he secretly desires affectionate attachment with his actual sons, although he avoids admitting as much because he fears affection as a weakness. It is interesting to note that Okonkwo doesn’t wish that Ezinma were a boy because she exhibits desirable masculine traits; rather, it is their bond of sympathy and understanding that he values.