



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Debating Religion and Imperialism in *Things Fall Apart*

Published on the eve of Nigerian independence, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was intended for a Western audience with cultural foundations rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions. Religion is a dominant theme in this story of civilizations clashing as British Christian missionaries arrive in a fictional Igbo district of Umuofia, located in present-day Nigeria. To fully deconstruct the repercussions of the Europeans' arrival, it is important for students to have a deeper understanding of West African religious traditions. The goal of this unit is to break down the notion of the "Other" in order to comprehend the impact of Christianity on indigenous values and belief systems.

The following are supplemental lessons to incorporate in a unit on European imperialism of the African continent in the late 19th century, ideally in conjunction with a close reading of Achebe's novel. The lessons are designed for a small, discussion-based classroom setting in an academic environment of open dialogue and critical analysis. The activities are intended to provide the students a means to examine the relationship between perception, personal experience, and cross-cultural understanding.

Objective

Students will gain a greater understanding of the indigenous religious practices of West Africa as they pertain to the pre-colonial and colonial lived experience; in addition, they will examine the role that religion played in the social and political imperialism of the African continent.

Grade Level/Class Size

This supplemental unit is intended for the 9th grade, though it can be amended for either younger or older students. Considering seminar-style discussion is the centerpiece of instruction, these activities are ideal for 15 students or less. It is also important to note that these activities are meant to be an addendum to a larger unit on global imperialism by European nation-states; they would work best with a group who is already versed on the factual content.

Supplemental Lessons/Activities

1. Cultural Relativism and Moral Absolutism
2. To Civilize or Not to Civilize?
3. West African Religious Traditions: Monotheistic or Polytheistic?
4. Ibo Proverbs

Culminating Assessment

The students will engage in a graded discussion, or “Socratic Seminar,” examining the comparative role of religion in *Things Fall Apart*. The discussion will focus on an organic, essential question that is derived from the critical reading of the novel. As the dynamic of each group is different, the question should be suited to the individual needs of the class.

The following are suggested essential questions:

1. How does religion contribute to internal (native-native) and external (native-colonizer) conflict?
2. What role does religion play in “things falling apart”?

In examining the answers, the students should refer to examples from the novel, in addition to other primary/secondary sources they have encountered throughout the unit.

Cultural Relativism vs. Moral Absolutism

Cultural Relativism	Moral Absolutism

Are you a cultural relativist or a moral absolutist?

Instructions: Gauge your reaction to the following statements, and prepare to share your thoughts with the class.

1. It is always wrong to take another person's life.

2. It is always wrong to steal.

3. It is always wrong to commit adultery.

To Civilize or Not to Civilize?
(That is the question.)

Instructions: After scouts from the Royal Niger Company brought back descriptions of the region of Africa surrounding the Niger River, there was a great debate prompted by the question of whether the English needed to “civilize” the tribes that lived there. Two main tribes dominated the region: the Ibo and the Marinekas. The scouts have given detailed information regarding their observations of the two tribes. As a loyal British citizen, your opinion is being solicited. Which tribe seems more in need of the civilizing presence of the British? Why? [**NOTE TO EDUCATOR: Marinekas is an anagram for Americans.**]

Cultural Practices of the Ibo	Cultural Practices of the Marinekas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Ibo are a segmented society, meaning they have no kings, but are organized into villages run by local elders. • The two basic units of government are the council of elders and the gathering of the whole tribe. • Peace is always sought before the clan goes to war. • During war, the victors often bring back the heads of the people they defeated as a symbol of victory. • People achieve respect through accomplishment, not by birth. • Within a clan, there are 5,000 to 10,000 people who considered themselves “relatives.” • There is a central market in each village which operates every four to eight days. • Society is very competitive, and people seek to demonstrate their prowess in sports and battle. • Women do not have much freedom or independence. • The Ibo are polygamous, meaning that men have multiple wives as a symbol of status. • Men are allowed to physically discipline their families. • Twin babies are seen as cursed and discarded into the woods. • To celebrate, people dance, play music, and feast. • Stimulants like palm-wine and the kola nut are used as part of traditional rituals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only members of certain families can rule the clan, and there is one chief from those families who rules the clan. • Marinekas tend to ostracize less powerful ethnic groups into overcrowded and poor villages. • Waste is often piled up just outside the village border, and smoke is continuously emitted into the air. • Diplomacy is avoided because the clan doesn’t want to appear weak. • Wars happen on a regular basis, but the villagers don’t always understand why. • Prisoners of war are tortured cruelly by simulation of death. • It is easier to achieve respect through birth than it is to do so through achievement. • Raw flesh is seen as a delicacy. • Society is very competitive, and people seek to demonstrate their prowess in sports and battle. • Physical beauty is also highly valued and many women have parts of their body removed or stuffed to look more beautiful. • Monogamy is encouraged but not widely observed. • People pierce body parts, burn their skin, and paint their faces for decorative purposes. • To celebrate, people gather in dark caves and dance to rhythmic music. • Dangerous stimulants are often used to alter consciousness

West African Religious Traditions: Monotheistic or Polytheistic?

Essential Question: Can the West African religious traditions be considered monotheistic or polytheistic?

[NOTE TO EDUCATOR: At the end of this lesson, students should be introduced to and familiar with the term pantheistic.]

Instructions: Each group will be assigned one of the following sources. Read and analyze the document in order to answer the question above. Be prepared to discuss and share your findings with the class. *As always, remember to pay close attention to the bibliographic information of each of these works.

DOCUMENT A

Kenneth Chigbo, *The Unheard of Cry of the Igbo People*. 2011, p. 100.

“Out nne na-amu mana o bughi out chi na-eke.” (The children of the same mother were each created by different personal gods.)

DOCUMENT B

John Wyndham, *Myths of Ifè*. London, 1921 (Source: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/afr/ife/index.htm>)
[The text of this book was translated to the author by the high priests of Ifè.]

Chapter I: The Beginning

Before this World was made
There reigned Arámfè in the realm of Heaven
Amidst his sons. Old were the hills around him;
The Sun had shone upon his vines and cornfields
Since time past reckoning. Old was Arámfè,
The father of the Gods: his youth had been
The youth of Heaven. . . Once when the King reclined
Upon the dais, and his sons lay prostrate
In veneration at his feet, he spoke
Of the great things he purposed:
"My sons, you know
But fair things which I made for you, before
I called your spirits from the Dusk: for always
Your eyes have watched the shadows and the wind
On waving corn, and I have given you
The dances and the chorus of the night—
An age of mirth and sunrise (the wine of Heaven)
Is your existence. ...

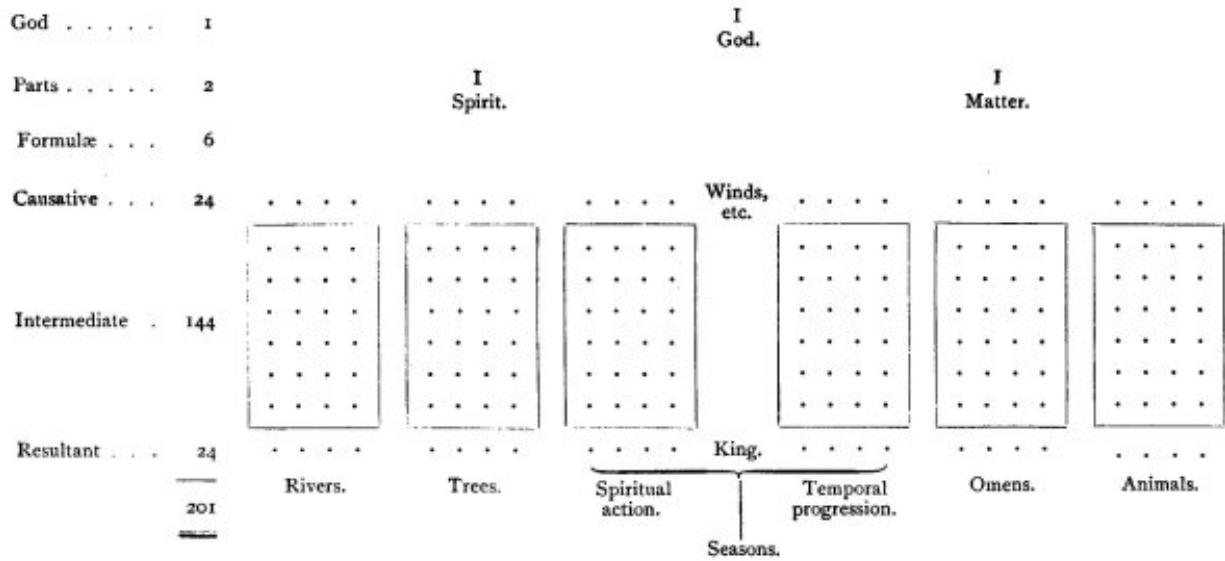
I laboured and the grim years passed:
Streams flowed along their sunny beds; I set
The stars above me, and the hills about;
I fostered budding trees, and taught the birds
Their song—the unshapely I had formed to beauty,
And as the ages came I loved to make
The beautiful more fair. . . All went not well:
A noble animal my mind conceived
Emerged in loathsome form to prey upon
My gentle creatures; a river, born to bask
In sunlit channels and mirror the steep hills,
Tore down its banks and ravaged field and plain;
While cataract and jagged precipice,
Now grand with years, remind me of dread days
When Heaven tottered, and wide rifts sundered my young
Fair hills, and all seemed lost. Yet—I prevailed.
Think, now, if the accomplished whole be Heaven,
How wonderful the anxious years of slow
And hazardous achievement—a destiny
For Gods. But yours it has not been to lead
Creation by the cliff's-edge way from Mass
To Paradise." He paused on the remembrance,
And Great Orísha cried: "Can we do naught?
What use in godhead without deeds to do?
Where yearns a helpless region for a hand
To guide it?" And Old Arámfè answered him:

"My son, your day approaches. Far-off, the haze
Rests always on the outer waste which skirts
Our realm; beyond, a nerveless Mass lies cold
'Neath floods which some malign unreason heaves.
Odúwa, first-born of my sons, to you I give
The five-clawed Bird, the sand of power. Go now,
Call a despairing land to smiling life
Above the jealous sea, and found sure homesteads
For a new race whose destiny is not
The eternal life of Gods. You are their judge;
Yours is the kingship, and to you all Gods
And men are subject. Wisest of my sons,
Orísha, yours is the grateful task to loose
Vague spirits waiting for the Dawn—to make
The race that shall be; and to you I give
This bag of Wisdom's guarded lore and arts
For Man's well-being and advancement. And you,
My younger sons, the chorus and the dance,
The voice of worship and the crafts are yours
To teach—that the new thankful race may know...

DOCUMENT C

Richard Edward Dennett, *At the Back of the Black Man's Mind*. 1906.

(Source: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/afr/mind/mind22.htm>)



Ibo Proverbs

Instructions: Consider the following Ibo proverbs. What does each one mean? What do they reveal about the values and morals of the society? Is there an equivalent proverb in American culture?

1. The sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them.
2. If a child washes his hands, he can eat with kings.
3. When the moon is shining, the cripple becomes hungry for a walk.
4. A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness.
5. A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing.
6. An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb.
7. The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did.
8. Eneke the bird says that since men have learned to shoot without missing, he has learned to fly without perching.
9. Looking at a king's mouth, one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast.
10. Where are the young suckers that will grow when the old banana tree dies?
11. A chick that will grow into a rooster can be spotted the very day it hatches.
12. A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm.
13. It is like Dimaragana, who would not lend his knife for cutting up dogmeat because the dog was taboo to him, but offered to use his teeth.
14. When mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth.
15. A baby on its mother's back does not know that the way is long.

Socratic Seminar: *Things Fall Apart*

What is a Socratic Seminar?

- A Socratic Seminar is a graded discussion that centers on student responses to a guiding question. In preparation for the Socratic Seminar, all students in the class read the same text, which is meant to provide common ground for the discussion.

What is the guiding question for the upcoming discussion?

This time we have two guiding questions:

1. How does religion contribute to internal (native-native) and external (native-colonizer) conflict?
2. What role does religion play in “things falling apart”?

What should be done to prepare for a Socratic Seminar?

- You need to prepare yourself thoroughly to answer the question and be able to substantiate your thoughts with specific examples. To this end, you should do the following:
 - Prepare a sheet with your notes and ideas so you can refer to it over the course of the discussion. Your note sheet will be collected at the end of class.
 - It is also a good idea to generate questions/comments that have occurred to you throughout the discussion.

What are the guidelines for participation in a Socratic Seminar?

- Refer to the novel as much as possible.
- Show that you've been listening to other people's comments.
- Use evidence to support your argument(s).
- Speak up so that all can hear you.
- Talk to each other, not the teacher.
- Everyone is expected to participate.

How will I be graded?

Your participation comprises two separate elements:

1. Your individual response to a pre-writing exercise that will take place upon your arrival to class;
2. Your participation in the Socratic Seminar itself;

Your participation in the Socratic Seminar will be evaluated according to the following standards:

You will earn points for doing the following:

- Making insightful comments
- Asking a relevant question
- Using evidence from the documents
- Responding directly to the comments of your peers
- Making a clear transition to a relevant issue

You will lose points for doing the following:

- Coming unprepared to participate
- Not paying attention
- Distracting others
- Being disrespectful
- Lacking evidence in your commentary

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