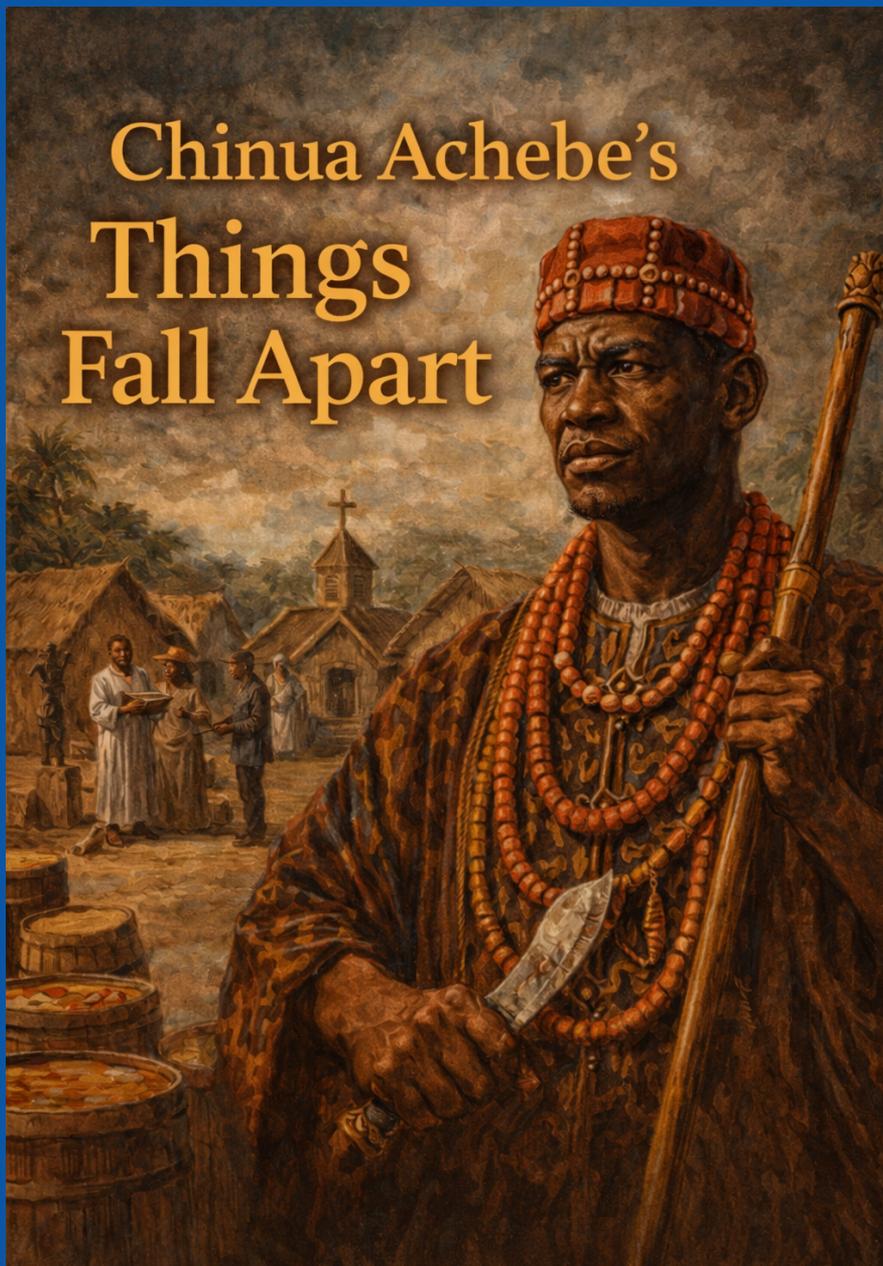


# Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart



**TextProject**  
**Background Builders**

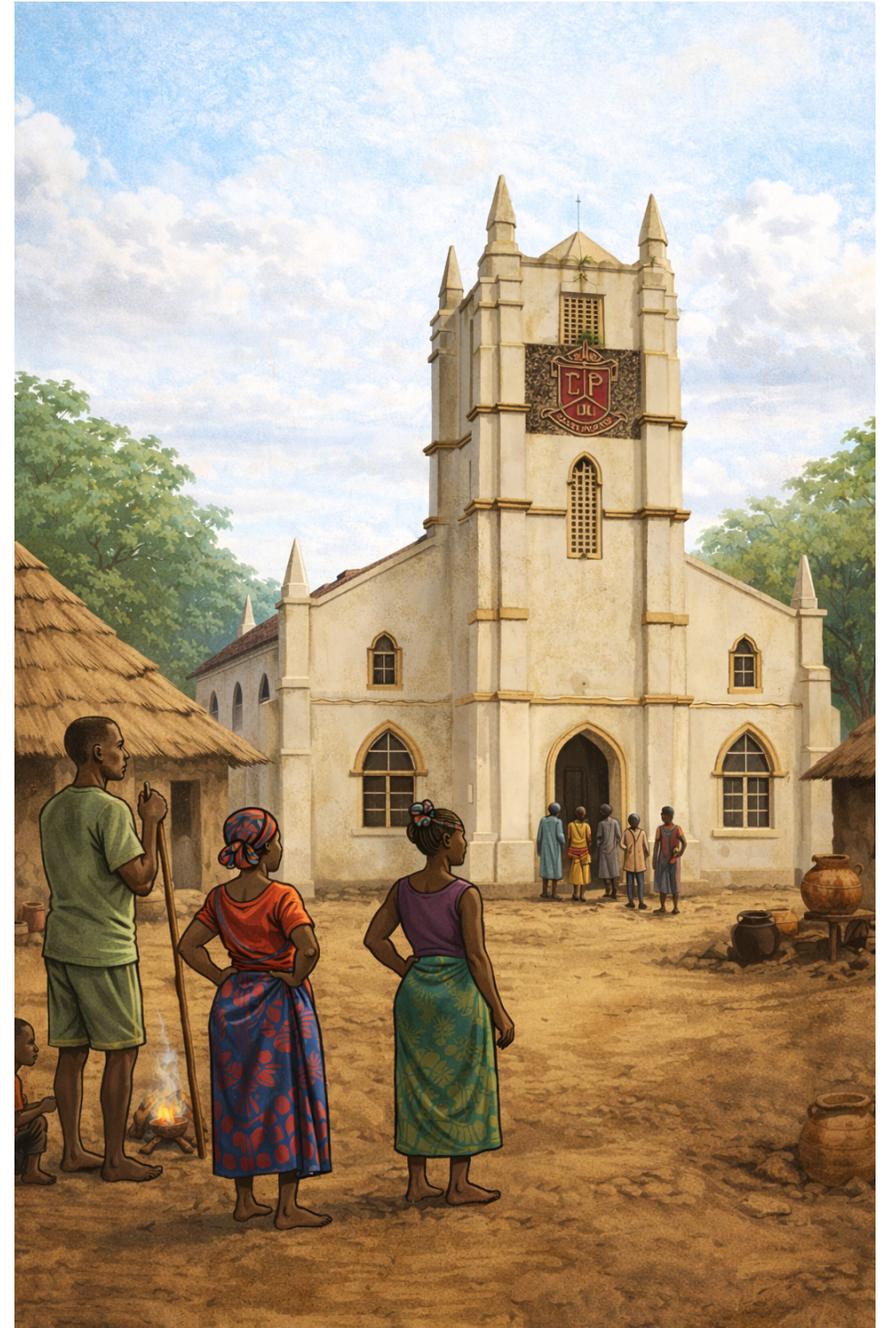
## When Beliefs Collide: What Happens When Cultures Meet?

A culture is more than food or dress. It includes religion, laws, family roles, and shared ideas about right and wrong. In *Things Fall Apart*, Igbo life follows clear rules. People honor their gods. They consult the Oracle—the sacred voice believed to speak for the god Agbala from a cave outside the village. Elders settle problems in public meetings. Life has order and meaning.

Then British missionaries arrive, bringing a new religion and new rules. The missionaries teach that there is one God and that Igbo gods are false. They build a church on land the villagers believe is cursed—the Evil Forest. When the missionaries survive there, some villagers begin to question whether the old gods still hold power.

The new church draws people who feel uneasy with Igbo customs. In *Things Fall Apart*, Nwoye, troubled by the killing of Ikemefuna, feels drawn to the Christian message. Other converts include osu—outcasts once shut out of full village life. The church gives them new respect.

At the same time, others feel anger and fear. Okonkwo sees conversion as weakness. He believes the new faith is pulling the clan apart. What once united them—shared rituals and shared belief—begins to break. Things do not fall apart in one moment. They fall apart step by step.



The missionaries built churches that looked European, not like Igbo homes or meeting places.



Igbo villages were governed by councils of elders who decided issues as a group.

## How Did Igbo Communities Govern Themselves?

Often, we think of a society as having a king or president. In Igbo villages there was usually no single person in charge of everything. Instead, leadership was shared by councils of elders and titled men. Men earned titles through hard work, bravery, and success in farming. Titles were not inherited automatically. Age also mattered. Elders were respected because they had lived long lives and were seen as wise.

When problems arose—over land, marriage, trade, or crime—leaders met in public spaces. They listened carefully to both sides. People could speak for themselves. The goal was not speed but rather agreement that the decision was fair.

At first, this system may seem informal. But it worked. It depended on reputation, honor, and shared customs. People understood the expectations and rules of their community and what would happen if they broke them.

When the British arrived, they looked for kings with whom to negotiate. In Igbo areas, there were none. So British officials appointed “warrant chiefs”—men they selected to act as leaders. Some had never held authority before. Many people did not accept them.

This sudden change disrupted a system that had worked for generations. Understanding how Igbo communities governed themselves helps explain why British rule felt so unsettling and unfair.

## Why Do People Join a New Religion?

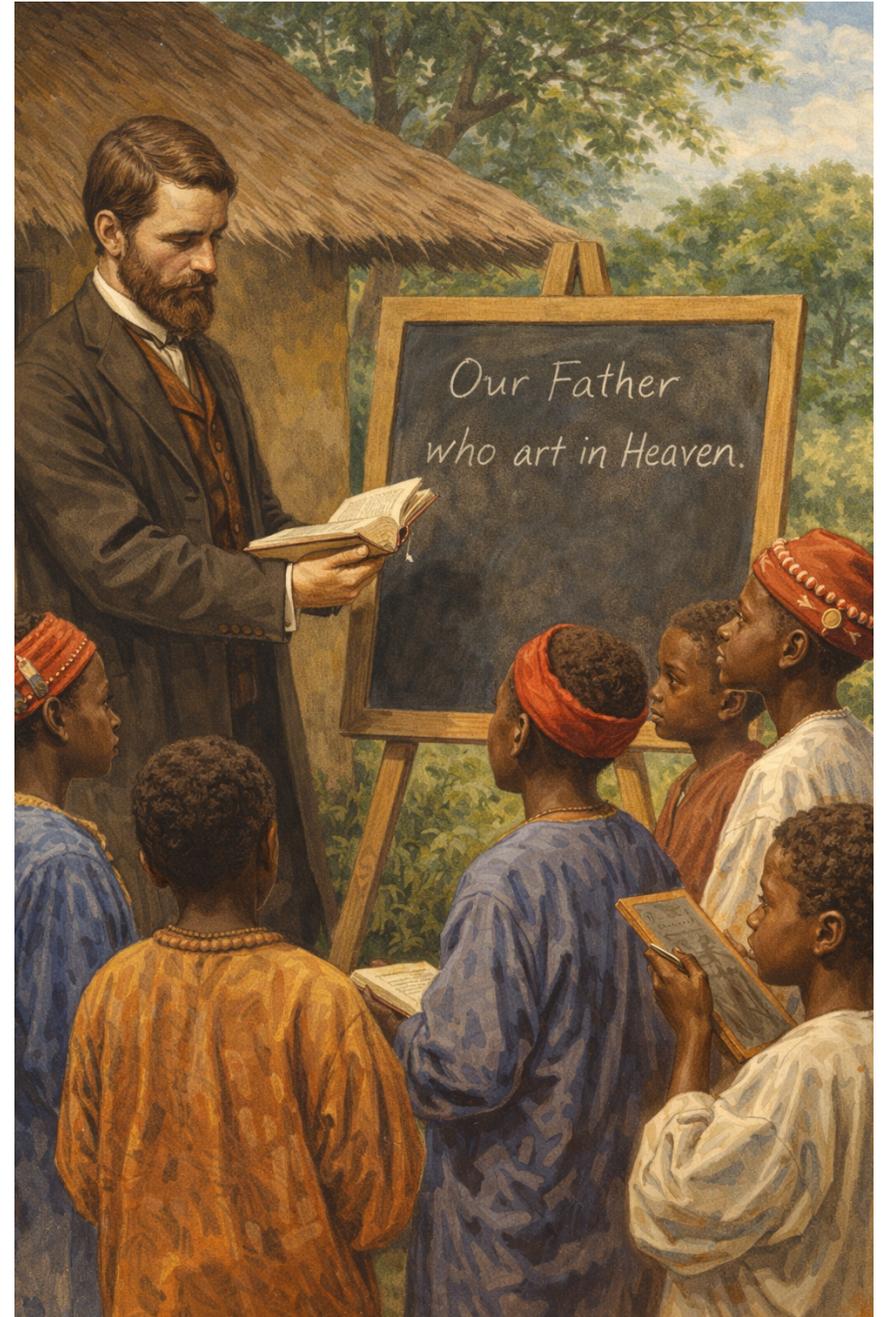
When Christian missionaries came to Igbo villages in the late 1800s, not everyone rejected them. Some people listened. Some even joined. Why would someone leave the religion of their ancestors?

A new faith can offer hope, especially during times of change. Colonial rule was already shifting power, laws, and trade. Old systems felt less certain. Christianity offered clear answers, a single all-powerful God, and the promise of eternal life. For some, that certainty was comforting.

The new church also offered belonging. In traditional Igbo society, status mattered deeply. Titles had to be earned. Strength and success brought honor. But not everyone thrived under these rules. Men who could not gain titles had little voice.

Missionaries preached that all souls were equal before God. They welcomed people others had pushed aside. The church gave converts new names, songs, and rituals. It also brought schools where children could learn to read and write. new forms of work.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Nwoye is drawn to the new church. He struggles with certain Igbo practices, including violence and harsh judgments. The Christian message of compassion speaks to him. His decision is not only about religion. It reshapes his identity and strains his relationship with his father.



A missionary teaching children shows how Christianity spread through schools and worship.



In Igbo life, yams are a sign of wealth and strength.

## Why Do Yams Matter So Much?

In Igbo life, yams are more than food. They are a sign of wealth, strength, and responsibility. Yams are often called the “king of crops.” Growing them takes skill and patience. A farmer must clear thick land, build tall mounds of soil, plant carefully saved seed yams, and protect the crop from too much rain or too little. The work is long and tiring. A poor harvest can mean hunger for a family. A strong harvest brings pride and security.

In *Things Fall Apart*, a man’s success is measured by his yam harvest. A man with many barns full of yams has status in the community. He can feed his family. He can host feasts during festivals. He can lend seed yams to younger men who are just starting out. Lending yams builds alliances and respect. Wealth is not just about having food—it is about being able to help others and fulfill social duties.

Farming yams is hard and demanding work. Because of this, a successful yam farmer is viewed as disciplined and strong. Understanding this helps us understand Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. His father, Unoka, was poor and unsuccessful with crops. Okonkwo fears that kind of failure more than anything. For him, success in farming proves he is not weak. Understanding why yams matter helps us see why pride, fear, honor, and reputation shape his world.

## Colonial Rule: Who Gains? Who Loses?

Colonial rule means one nation takes control of another land and its people. In the late 1800s, European nations competed for land in Africa. At a conference in Berlin in 1884–1885, European leaders divided African lands. No African leaders were invited. The borders the Europeans drew often ignored ethnic groups, languages, and established political systems.

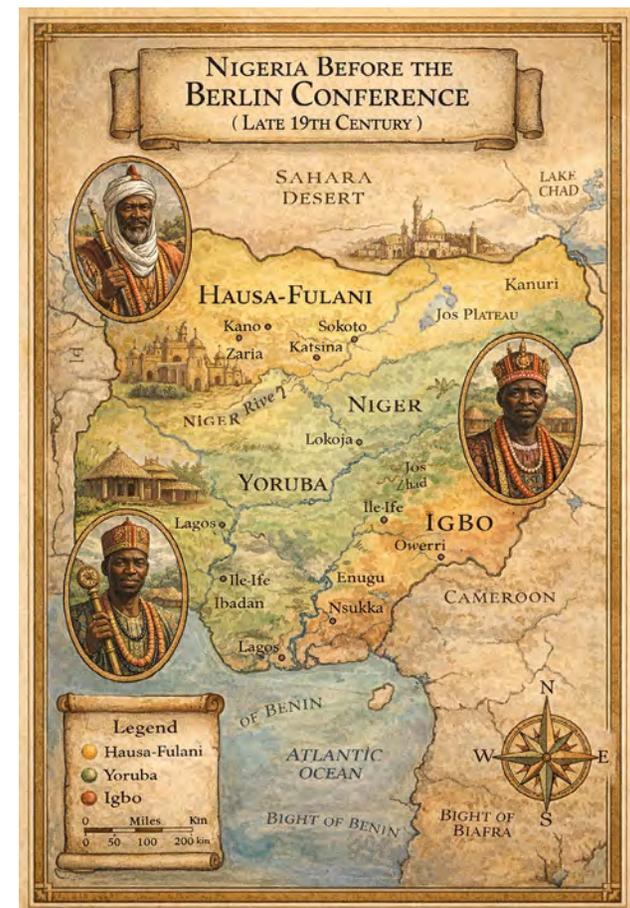
Britain claimed a large area in West Africa. Rather than conquering the land with massive armies, the British moved gradually at first. They established trading posts and churches. British leaders said they were bringing order, Christianity, and progress. But they also wanted access to resources, especially palm oil, which was used to grease machines in British factories. Control of land meant control of trade and profit.

But the story was even more complicated. Before British rule, the area of west Africa was home to many independent groups with different languages, religions, and ways of governing. Three large groups were especially important: the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the southwest, and the Igbo in the southeast. The three groups traded with one another and sometimes fought. But each governed itself.

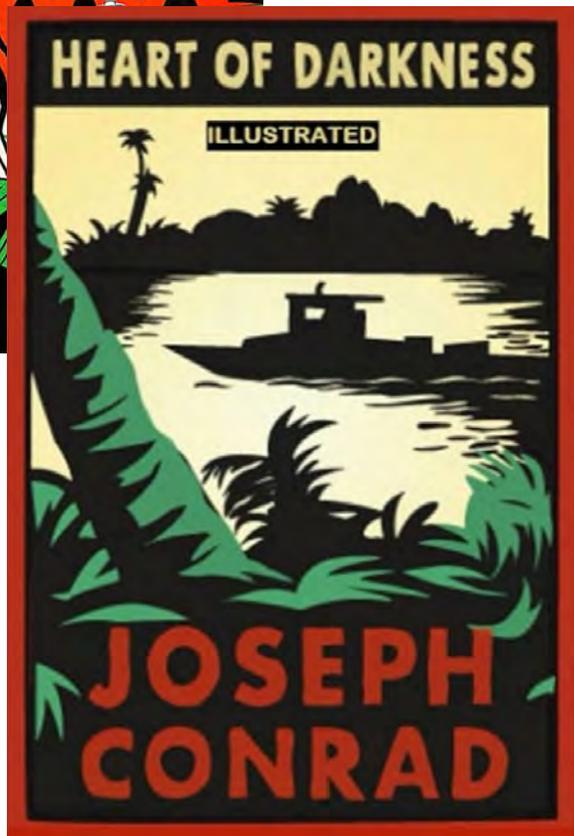
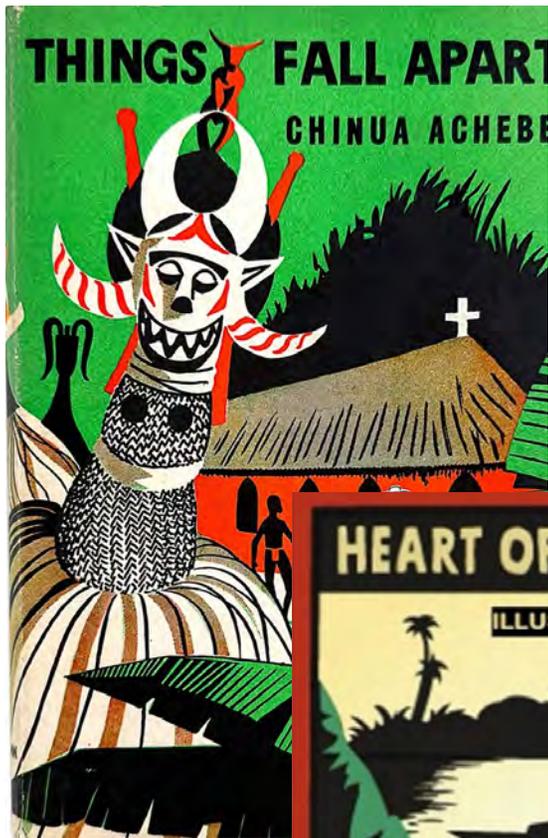
The Hausa-Fulani lived in large Muslim states led by emirs who were strong leaders. The Yoruba lived in cities and towns ruled by kings. The Igbo mostly lived in villages where

councils of elders and respected men made decisions for the community.

In 1914, the British joined the regions into a single colony called Nigeria. The borders were drawn for British purposes—not because the people inside the borders thought of themselves as one nation. Very different peoples were suddenly told they were one country. That decision would shape Nigeria's future long after British rule ended.



Three distinct cultural groups were combined into one country by the British.



Before *Things Fall Apart*, many European writers portrayed Africa as mysterious, dark, and uncivilized.

## How Africa Was Shown in Earlier Novels Written by Europeans

When *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958, it was not the first novel set in Africa. For decades, European writers had written books about the continent. But almost all were told from a European point of view. The land was described in detail, but African people were rarely the main characters. They did not often speak for themselves but appeared as background figures in stories about European explorers, traders, or soldiers.

One well-known example is *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. In that novel, Africa is the setting for a journey made by a European sailor. The focus is on what happens to the Europeans, not on the inner lives of African people.

These kinds of books shaped how many readers in Europe and the North America imagined Africa. They often suggested that African societies were simple. Readers rarely saw detailed portrayals of family life, law, or religion within African communities.

In the 1950s, most African countries were still under European rule. African voices were not widely heard in world literature. Achebe wanted to change that. *Things Fall Apart* shows Igbo life as a full society, with strengths, flaws, humor, and conflict. Achebe was not just writing a story. He was entering a conversation — and reshaping it.



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