



Cornell University

## 2005 New Student Reading Project

### Study Questions

1. Traditional societies are often thought to be generally free of internal conflicts about values, and to be fixed and essentially unchanging over time. What aspects of the society depicted in *Things Fall Apart* might resist those assumptions?
2. When Europeans arrive in Okonkwo's village, one result is a new kind of government and a new kind of law. How do the new legal and governmental practices and institutions differ from those that preceded them? Are the changes good, bad, or something more complicated, and why?
3. Okonkwo's self-understanding is deeply bound up with his need to affirm and protect what he thinks of as his "manliness." What are the main features of Okonkwo's view of masculinity, and how does his view relate to that of other important characters in the novel?
4. What should we make of the role of women in the novel? Are the female characters just dispensable appendages of the male characters in the story?
5. Stories and storytelling play a central role in the novel. What are some of the most important aspects of that role, for instance, in the preservation of social customs, and the shaping of individual identities?
6. Okonkwo's friend Obierika is described as "a man who thought about things" (p. 125). What does Obierika think about, and how does that reflection ultimately put him at odds with Okonkwo?
7. An epic hero, like Odysseus, is typically set apart from other characters by his capacity to endure many trials and tests. A tragic hero, like Hamlet or Oedipus, is typically a man of consequence brought down by an insuperable conflict, or through his own weakness. Is Okonkwo an epic hero, a tragic hero, or is he a hero at all?
8. It is said of Okonkwo at one point that "Clearly his personal god or chi was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his chi. The saying of the elders was not true—that if a man said yea his chi also affirmed. Here was a man whose chi said nay despite his own affirmation." (p. 131). How should we understand the roles

of fate and individual responsibility in the novel in light of the role that the Ibo notion of chi plays throughout the story?

9. In *English and the African Writer*, Achebe writes that his work represents “a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language.” What features of the novel embody this ambition? Do they help or hinder Achebe’s attempt to make the world depicted in the novel accessible to a broad audience?

10. An important assumption in the novel is the close connection between an individual’s action and the communal fate of all. Okonkwo is told by the priest of the earth goddess, Ani, “The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan.” (p. 30) Does this explain why, strong willed as he is, Okonkwo accepts without question the communal sanctions prescribed for his misdeeds?

Page numbers cited here are from the Cornell University Edition of *Things Fall Apart*.