

BOOK REVIEW

Terri Ochiagha. *A Short History of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018. 146 pp. List of Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$15.95. Paper. ISBN: 139780821423486.

Terri Ochiagha presents an eloquent and distinctive background to Chinua Achebe's iconic novel *Things Fall Apart* (hereafter *TFA*) in nine essays spanning three sections: "Turning and Turning in the Widening Gyre," "The Blood Dimmed Tide is Loosed," and "*Spiritus Mundi*."

As expected, her introduction provides a context for the essays that follow.

"The World of Stories" is the first of three essays in the first section, focusing on Achebe's formative years, when he first encountered Igbo lore and Mbari art. Functioning as a complex, ritualized process for mediating Igbo reality creatively, Mbari art is potent for cleansing, atonement, control (of strange spirits) and, in the days of the white man's rampaging arrival, for repelling the alien forces. Mbari art and culture, the author argues, is implicated in *TFA*'s content and form.

"Encounters with the Colonial Library" presents the educational background that influenced Achebe's creative spirit, first at Government College in Umuahia and next at University College in Ibadan, Nigeria. Achebe's encounter with library holdings depicting off-center perceptions of Africa and Africans in Umuahia, his further encounter with certain writers, including Joseph Conrad and his *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and his exposure to traditional religion in Ibadan convinced him to write his own story as an African. *TFA* emerged from this ecology of colonial discourses.

"The Lost Manuscript and Other Harrowing Adventures" relates Achebe's dealings with a typing service in the UK that received his manuscript with prejudice, unwilling to seriously consider a work of literature by an African and claiming to have lost it. Interestingly, it was this colonial attitude the author was seeking to denounce. Angela Beattie, Achebe's senior colleague at the national radio talk department, helped recover the untyped manuscript from the company. Her success would help to define Achebe's writing career and its impact on African writing.

“First Impressions,” the first essay of the second section dwelling on the ripples caused by *TFA*’s publication, examines its earliest critical receptions in the nascent African literary sphere. With the exception of a few less-encouraging reviews, most critical examinations were glowing endorsements for *TFA*. In Nigeria, Achebe’s teachers tepidly described it as pleasant. But Ulli Beier published two affirming reviews of the work in *Black Orpheus* and assigned it to his students. America would confirm this positive reception, earning him accolades and syllabus listings.

“*Things Fall Apart* and its Critics” examines the diverse critical reactions *TFA* elicited. Some held that it fused African resources with the Western literary form, changing the latter altogether, while others, using Western critical tools, realized the universalist significance in *TFA*. Drawing on Marxism, some critics argued the work was a symbolic blend of sorts, which when made to overlap, offered different insights. Gender scholars lucidly argued that the text reinforced the existing patriarchal order via its paucity of strong, memorable female characters. Groups and critics all had different responses to the work, depending on their specific contexts and agendas.


“Of Canons, Sons, and Daughters” describes how Achebe’s early influence rippled through his immediate circle of friends, students, and compatriots. After he was appointed editor at Heinemann’s African Writers Series on the heels of *TFA*’s success, his skill would subsequently be shared with several other Nigerian and African writers who ingeniously tapped into the themes, motifs, form, and cultural matrices typified in *TFA*.

The first chapter of the last section, “Artistic Interactions,” addresses the lack of expert advice on the choice of artistic cover illustrations by publishers; the resulting images seemed to reinforced the message that *TFA* aimed to deplore. This was briefly remedied by the Igbo modernist artist Uche Okeke, whose use of Mbari art conceptualized the influence of community in the face of history’s contradictory possibilities.

The chapter titled “Adaptations, Appropriations, and Mimesis” unravels how *TFA*’s popularity informed intermedial adaptations at home and abroad. These include radio drama, audiovisual film, intertextual adoptions of its parts in Onitsha Market literature pamphlets, television drama, and performances in Nigeria, the UK, the U.S., and other places. The penultimate segment takes a new direction, describing one troupe that traveled widely on international performance tours.

The reactions of often-ignored pedestrian readers—students as well as teachers—in regions with cultural and linguistic difference to *TFA* are taken up in “*Things Fall Apart*’s Worldwide Readers.” Whereas African readers identified with it, their Western counterparts, led astray by lame translations, publishers’ desultory fervor, and apathetic promotions reacted with the will-to-eroticize. Nevertheless, Ochiagha concludes that *TFA*’s literary significance endures.

Ochiagha’s work is a seminal piece presenting fresh and illuminating information to literary scholars and Africanists alike, an excellent and laudable update to a timeless classic!

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Mengara, Daniel M. 2019. “Colonial Intrusion and Stages of Colonialism in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.” *African Studies Review* 62 (4): 31–56. doi: [10.1017/asr.2018.85](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.85).

Ochiagha, Terri. 2014. “‘A Little Book of Logic’ – Reconstructing Colonial Arts of Suasion at Government College, Umuahia.” *History in Africa* 41: 63–82. doi: [10.1017/hia.2014.1](https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2014.1).

Rhoads, Diana Akers. 1993. “Culture in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.” *African Studies Review* 36 (2): 61–72. doi: [10.2307/524733](https://doi.org/10.2307/524733).