

proverbs in things fall apart and their meanings

proverbs in things fall apart and their meanings, Chinua Achebe's seminal novel, "Things Fall Apart," is rich with the oral traditions of the Igbo people, particularly their proverbs, which serve as the very fabric of their society and the wisdom passed down through generations. Understanding these Igbo sayings is crucial to grasping the nuances of the characters, their motivations, and the cultural upheaval depicted in the story. This article will delve deep into the significant proverbs featured in "Things Fall Apart," exploring their literal translations, their symbolic representations, and their profound impact on the narrative and the reader's comprehension of the Igbo way of life before and during the colonial intrusion. We will examine how these sayings illuminate themes of justice, societal structure, personal responsibility, and the inevitability of change, offering a comprehensive guide to the linguistic and philosophical heart of Achebe's masterpiece.

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The Significance of Proverbs in Igbo Culture

In Igbo society, proverbs are not merely decorative linguistic devices; they are the salt of speech, the essential components that give flavor and depth to communication. Achebe masterfully employs these sayings to portray the richness and complexity of the Igbo worldview. Within the narrative, proverbs function as legal precedents, moral guidance, and expressions of communal wisdom. They are the currency of intellectual and social standing, demonstrating a speaker's eloquence, intelligence, and understanding of societal norms. Elders, in particular, rely heavily on proverbs to settle disputes, teach younger generations, and maintain the social order. The very act of using proverbs signifies respect for tradition and for the collective memory of the community. Their presence in "Things Fall Apart" underscores the profound connection between language, culture, and identity, making them indispensable to understanding the novel's intricate social tapestry.

Key Proverbs and Their Meanings

Chinua Achebe liberally sprinkles "Things Fall Apart" with Igbo proverbs, each carrying a significant weight of meaning that illuminates the characters' lives and the societal structures of Umuofia. These sayings offer insights into the values, beliefs, and practical wisdom that guided the Igbo people. Understanding these often concise yet profound statements is key to appreciating the depth of the novel and the intricacies of the culture it depicts.

"A man who pays respect gets plenty of good things."

This proverb directly emphasizes the importance of deference and respect within Igbo society. It suggests that acknowledging the status and authority of elders and social superiors is not merely a matter of politeness but a strategic way to gain favor, receive blessings, and ultimately prosper. Okonkwo, despite his ambition, often struggles with this, particularly in his dealings with older, more traditional figures, which foreshadows some of his later conflicts. The proverb highlights the reciprocal nature of social interactions, where outward displays of respect yield tangible benefits.

"If a child washes his hands he could eat with kings."

This widely recognized Igbo proverb speaks to the idea that proper upbringing and adherence to social norms are prerequisites for social advancement and acceptance into higher circles. A child who has been taught good manners and has demonstrated maturity is considered worthy of associating with even the most respected individuals, including chiefs and elders. It underscores the value placed on discipline, cleanliness (both literal and figurative), and the cultivation of character as pathways to recognition and respect within the community. This proverb implicitly criticizes those who lack such qualities, suggesting they remain ostracized from positions of influence.

"The sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on

those who kneel under them."

This proverb carries a powerful message about ambition and the natural order of success. It implies that those who are proactive, assertive, and position themselves advantageously will reap rewards before those who are passive or subservient. It speaks to the merits of initiative and standing one's ground. While it can be interpreted as encouraging ambition, it can also be seen as a commentary on hierarchy and the established order, where visibility and proximity to power often lead to greater fortune. In the context of the novel, it resonates with Okonkwo's drive for greatness and his often forceful approach to achieving it.

"When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk."

This proverb beautifully captures the human desire to participate in life's joys and activities when opportunities arise, regardless of one's limitations. The moonlit nights often provided a setting for social gatherings and celebrations. Even someone physically impaired would feel the strong urge to join in the festivities. It highlights how favorable circumstances can ignite dormant desires and ambitions. In the novel, this sentiment might reflect the community's longing for peace and normalcy, or perhaps individual desires that are suppressed until conditions allow them to surface.

"If I spill it on the ground, the dry season will lick it up."

This proverb speaks to pragmatism and the avoidance of waste, particularly in the context of resources like palm-wine, which was a common beverage and economic commodity. It means that if a valuable liquid is spilled, the dry season's heat will quickly evaporate it, signifying a loss that cannot be recovered. The saying implies a sense of responsibility towards preserving what is valuable and a practical understanding of how natural conditions affect resources. It can also be interpreted more broadly as a commentary on the consequences of carelessness or poor judgment, where valuable opportunities or assets can be lost due to inaction or mismanagement.

"Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let that one grow wings of brass."

This is a pivotal proverb that encapsulates the principles of coexistence and the necessity of strength when conflict is unavoidable. The first part, "Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too," advocates for peaceful coexistence and mutual tolerance between different powers or individuals, even if they possess differing strengths. However, the crucial addition, "If one says no to the other, let that one grow wings of brass," introduces the concept of preparedness for conflict. It suggests that if peaceful coexistence fails and one party insists on dominance or opposition, they must be prepared to face the consequences with great fortitude and strength. This proverb is particularly relevant to the arrival of the white missionaries and the colonial administration, posing a challenge that Umuofia must ultimately confront with formidable resolve.

"The greatest king does not sit on a throne."

This proverb challenges conventional notions of power and leadership. It suggests that true greatness and authority are not always visible or symbolized by outward displays of pomp and ceremony, like sitting on a throne. Instead, genuine leadership might reside in wisdom, influence, moral authority, or the ability to guide and protect the community effectively, often from within. This can be interpreted as valuing substance over show, and inner strength over outward declaration. It subtly critiques the idea that power is solely derived from formal positions, pointing towards a more profound, perhaps even spiritual, form of leadership that permeates the community.

Proverbs as Tools of Characterization

The proverbs used by characters in "Things Fall Apart" serve as powerful tools for revealing their personalities, motivations, and understanding of the world. For instance, Okonkwo's preference for direct action and his occasional disregard for the subtlety of proverbs can highlight his impetuous nature and his internal struggle against his father's legacy of perceived weakness. Conversely, elders like Obierika, who are adept at deploying proverbs appropriately, demonstrate their wisdom, their deep connection to their culture, and their thoughtful approach to life's challenges. The way a character uses or responds to a proverb provides a window into their character, their social standing, and their intellectual capacity. Achebe's masterful inclusion of these sayings allows the reader to infer much about the inner workings of the characters without explicit exposition, enriching the depth and realism of the novel.

Proverbs as Indicators of Cultural Values

The proverbs embedded within "Things Fall Apart" are not just linguistic ornaments; they are the embodiment of Igbo cultural values, ethical principles, and social norms. Sayings about respect, hospitality, hard work, and the importance of community living directly inform the reader about what the Igbo people held dear. The emphasis on communal responsibility, the fear of being an outcast (osu), and the intricate systems of justice and arbitration are all reflected in the proverbs. They illustrate a society that deeply values tradition, wisdom, and the collective well-being. The presence and application of these proverbs highlight a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of life, morality, and social cohesion that existed before the disruptive arrival of external forces.

Proverbs and the Theme of Change

The proverbs in "Things Fall Apart" also play a critical role in illustrating the theme of change and the erosion of traditional Igbo society. As the colonial powers impose their influence, the effectiveness and relevance of the old ways, including the proverbs that encapsulate them, begin to be challenged. The clash between traditional Igbo wisdom, represented by the proverbs, and the new European ideologies and laws creates a profound tension. The novel suggests that while proverbs offer enduring wisdom, the inability to adapt or to effectively counter the external forces threatening their way of life leads to the disintegration of the very society they were meant to sustain. The proverbs, in a sense,

become symbols of a fading era, their power to guide and protect Umuofia diminishing in the face of overwhelming change, ultimately reflecting the tragic irony of the novel's title.

The enduring power of proverbs in "Things Fall Apart" lies in their ability to provide a window into a rich and complex culture, offering timeless wisdom that continues to resonate with readers. Chinua Achebe's skillful use of these Igbo sayings transforms the novel from a mere narrative into a profound exploration of culture, tradition, and the impact of colonialism.

Frequently Asked Questions

How does the proverb 'When the moon is shining the cripple too can see' relate to Okonkwo's initial rise to power in Things Fall Apart?

This proverb highlights how favorable circumstances (like a time of peace or prosperity, symbolized by the shining moon) can allow even those with disadvantages (the cripple) to achieve success. Okonkwo's rise is partly attributed to the stability and opportunities present in Umuofia during his younger years, allowing him to overcome his father's legacy of failure and gain prominence.

What is the significance of the proverb 'The owl that hoots in the night, what does it say? Is it calling the dawn or something else?' in relation to the arrival of the white missionaries?

This proverb signifies the ominous and unsettling nature of unknown events. The arrival of the white missionaries is like the hooting owl – its purpose and ultimate impact are unclear, creating an atmosphere of unease and foreboding. The ambiguity of the owl's call mirrors the Igbo people's initial uncertainty and apprehension about the missionaries' presence and intentions.

Explain the meaning of 'If a child washes his hands, he could eat with kings.' and how it applies to Okonkwo's desire for status.

This proverb emphasizes that proper conduct and merit allow one to associate with respected and powerful people. Okonkwo's relentless pursuit of status and his adherence to traditional Igbo values of strength, hard work, and success are his ways of 'washing his hands,' believing it will grant him the respect and acceptance of the clan elders, whom he considers the 'kings' of Umuofia.

How does the proverb 'An old woman is always uneasy when dry cassava is served.' reflect the fear and resistance to change within Umuofia?

This proverb illustrates that those accustomed to certain ways become anxious when those ways are

disrupted or when faced with something unfamiliar. The old woman's unease stems from the dry cassava, a different preparation, symbolizing the Igbo people's deep-seated fear and resistance to the new customs and beliefs introduced by the white missionaries, which threaten their traditional way of life.

What does 'The sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them.' convey about the social hierarchy and Okonkwo's ambition?

This proverb suggests that power and influence naturally flow from those at the top downwards. It reflects a meritocratic, yet hierarchical, system where those who are already established and respected (standing before the sun) are favored. Okonkwo's ambition is fueled by this understanding; he strives to be among those who stand, earning their position through strength and achievement, so that prosperity and recognition will eventually reach him.

In Things Fall Apart, how does the proverb 'A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness.' connect to Okonkwo's interactions with tribal elders?

This proverb underscores the importance of deference and respect for established authority in achieving one's own success within the community. Okonkwo, despite his often impetuous nature, understands and largely practices this. By showing respect to the elders and demonstrating his adherence to their customs and wisdom, he aims to earn their approval and, in turn, pave his own path to becoming a respected leader within Umuofia.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to proverbs in Things Fall Apart, along with their meanings and descriptions:

1. *The Weight of Ancestral Wisdom*

This book explores the pervasive influence of proverbs and oral traditions on the Igbo society depicted in Things Fall Apart. It delves into how these sayings, passed down through generations, served as the bedrock of their social, ethical, and legal frameworks. The text examines the power of these proverbs to shape individual behavior and maintain community harmony, as well as their limitations when confronted with external change.

2. *A Seed of Meaning, A Harvest of Truth*

This title highlights the deep significance embedded within each proverb, akin to a small seed containing the potential for a bountiful harvest of understanding. The book would analyze specific Igbo proverbs from Things Fall Apart, dissecting their literal meanings and then exploring the layered cultural and philosophical truths they convey. It emphasizes how these concise phrases encapsulate complex ideas about justice, responsibility, and the natural order.

3. *The Fading Echoes of Oral Law*

This title directly addresses the decline and eventual suppression of traditional Igbo proverbs and the oral legal system they represented, as seen in the novel. The book would focus on how the arrival of

colonialism disrupted the transmission and authority of these ancient sayings. It would examine the consequences of this cultural erosion, illustrating how the loss of this wisdom left the community vulnerable and disoriented.

4. *Unearthing the Roots of Adage*

This book would focus on the etymological and historical roots of key proverbs used by the Igbo people in *Things Fall Apart*. It would trace the origins of these sayings, connecting them to the specific societal contexts, natural phenomena, and historical events that gave them birth. The text aims to show how understanding the deeper history of these proverbs illuminates their enduring relevance and power.

5. *The Weaver's Thread of Wisdom*

This title uses the metaphor of a weaver to represent the intricate and interconnected nature of Igbo proverbs. The book would explore how individual proverbs are not isolated statements but rather threads woven into a larger tapestry of cultural knowledge and understanding. It would examine how these proverbs complement and reinforce each other, creating a cohesive worldview for the community.

6. *When the Drumbeat of Proverbs Faltered*

This title powerfully conveys the moment when the traditional rhythm and authority of Igbo proverbs began to break down under the pressure of colonial influence. The book would analyze the specific instances and societal shifts that led to this faltering, examining how external forces undermined the cultural foundations represented by these sayings. It would explore the psychological and social impact of this disruption on the characters and the community.

7. *The Leopard's Claw: Proverbs of Power and Prudence*

This title draws upon a likely Igbo proverb that uses powerful imagery to represent the balance between strength and careful judgment. The book would analyze proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* that deal with leadership, warfare, and the exercise of authority. It would explore how these sayings teach the importance of both prowess and foresight, guiding individuals and the community in times of conflict and decision-making.

8. *A Story Told in Parables: The Igbo Moral Compass*

This title frames the proverbs within *Things Fall Apart* as essential components of the Igbo moral framework, operating like parables that guide ethical conduct. The book would explore how these sayings served as teaching tools, instilling values of respect, hard work, and communal responsibility. It would analyze how the proverbs provided a shared understanding of right and wrong, shaping the moral landscape of the society.

9. *Beneath the Bark of Tradition: Proverbs in a Changing World*

This title suggests an exploration of the enduring relevance and potential adaptability of Igbo proverbs, even as their traditional societal context undergoes radical transformation. The book would examine how the characters in *Things Fall Apart* attempt to invoke or interpret these proverbs in the face of unprecedented challenges. It would question whether these ancient sayings could offer solace, guidance, or even resistance against the encroaching colonial power.

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