Chike's School Days

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHINUA ACHEBE

Chinua Achebe was born in the Igbo village of Ogidi, Nigeria. In his youth, he always excelled at school, and eventually won a scholarship to study medicine at the University of Ibadan. However, he switched to English literature while in college, and soon after began to write short stories, many of which took as their theme traditional African spiritualities. *Things Fall Apart*, his most well-known novel, was published in 1958 to international acclaim. In addition to writing, Achebe also worked as a reporter. He supported and served as an ambassador for Biafra during the 1967-1970 war for Biafran independence from Nigeria. He tried to enter politics but was disappointed by the level of corruption and elitism he discovered in the system. In the 1970s, he moved to the United States, where he worked as a professor of literature at Bard College and then as a professor of Africana studies at Brown University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Chike's School Days" takes place around the same time that Achebe himself was growing up—the beginning stages of the British occupation of Nigeria. The story relates the ways in which various characters navigate the imposition of this new culture onto their way of life, either by adopting that culture or resisting it. At the historical moment when Achebe wrote the story, postcolonial literature was becoming an internationally recognized genre. Writers and intellectuals alike were grappling with themes such as colonialism and resistance in their work, and this cultural environment likely contributed to Achebe's choice of subject matter.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As an example of postcolonial literature, "Chike's School Days" thematically relates to Achebe's canonical novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Both narratives center on the destruction of local African cultures at the hands of the British. The key difference between the two is that "Chike's School Days" starts at the beginning, so to speak, examining the ways in which colonial influence affected children, whereas *Things Fall Apart* explores the impact of British oppression on Igbo adults. Another book by Achebe that is deeply related to "Chike's School Days" is *Chike and the River*, which also follows the character of Chike as he navigates school for the first time. Achebe wrote *Chike and the River* in order to provide African schoolchildren with a book whose protagonist is a young boy who shares their cultural background. Also relevant is Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which also explores the ways in which colonial oppression affects children growing up. Another important theme in Rushdie's novel is the power and meaning of names, a concept that Achebe engages with at the very beginning of "Chike's School Days." Finally, *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver addresses similar themes as "Chike's School Days," but from the opposite angle. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, a white missionary family living in the Congo struggles to reconcile their faith and values with those of the local people. While the family set out to convert the villagers to Christianity, strong resistance among the locals renders this mission impossible, and as Congo gains its independence while the family is on their mission, the political situation becomes dangerous for foreigners. In a way, *The Poisonwood Bible* and "Chike's School Days" bookend the narrative of colonial influence on the African continent: Achebe's story presents the beginning of colonialism as a form of violence to local traditions, and Kingsolver's novel illustrates the end of colonialism and liberation of local peoples as a threat to colonial families.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Chike's School Days
- **When Written:** 1960
- **Where Written:** Nigeria
- **When Published:** 1972
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern; Postcolonial
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** A small Igbo village in in early 20th-century colonial Nigeria
- **Climax:** The schoolteacher describes the "explosive mechanism" of seed dispersal to Chike's class.
- **Antagonist:** British colonialism
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

It Runs in the Family. Like the narrator, Chike, Chinua Achebe was part of the first generation among his family to be raised Christian rather than within the traditional Igbo religion. However, as a young adult, Achebe became fascinated with forms of African spirituality, and his studies heavily influenced his writing.

Not a One-Hit Wonder. Chike is also the protagonist of *Chike and the River*, a children's book by Achebe that he wrote to address his concerns about the understanding his children

would develop about race, as they studied in mostly white schools in Lagos.

PLOT SUMMARY

"Chike's School Days" takes place in a Nigerian Igbo village as the inhabitants navigate the early stages of 20th-century British colonialism. The protagonist, Chike, is the firstborn son to his parents, Sarah and Amos, making his birth a cause for celebration. In fact, his parents are so excited to welcome the first boy into the family that they give him three names at his baptism: John, in recognition of the family's recent conversion to Christianity; Chike; and Obiajulu, which means "the mind is at last at rest." His family isn't like the others in the village: they are Christians now, and have different values. In fact, Sarah even tells her children not to accept food from the neighbors, because they offered it to "idols." Around age four or five, then, a precocious Chike rejects some yams his neighbor offers him, saying he didn't eat "heathen food." The neighbor is offended, especially since in the traditional caste system, Chike is an Osu—a member of the lowest social class.

Chike inherited his class status from his mother, Sarah, who is an Osu woman. This means that due to Amos's higher social status, Amos broke the social code of the village to marry her. He was encouraged to do so by Mr. Brown, an English missionary living in the village who converted Amos to Christianity and, in doing so, convinced him to disregard his culture's traditional understandings of class division. Amos's engagement to Sarah was so shocking that his mother, Elizabeth, tried desperately to dissuade him from this decision. Although she, too, had converted to Christianity, she was so distraught over her son's choice of wife that she went to the diviner, a respected practitioner of the local religion, to perform a ritual that would bring Amos back to his senses. The ritual didn't work—Amos ended up marrying Sarah—but nonetheless Elizabeth switched back to practicing traditional Igbo spirituality. By marrying Sarah, Amos is now an Osu by default, as are Chike and his five sisters.

In the story's present, Chike is eager to start school, and the time finally comes when he is about six or seven years old. His sisters warn him with an Igbo song about the schoolteacher "beating them to death" with his notorious cane. But in spite of these threats, Chike is fascinated with school and adores learning. The education he receives is an eclectic mixture of religion and Western history, all communicated by way of songs. Chike especially enjoys the English songs he sings—even though he and his schoolmates don't understand (and can't even pronounce) most of the words. When Chike gets a little older, the schoolteacher begins to use long English words in class, which impresses and intimidates the students. In fact, Chike is so smitten with the English language that he goes home and invents songs with words he's picked out of his *New Method Reader*. As he sings, although the words themselves are often nonsensical, he feels happy and imagines a mysterious but exciting new world.

CHARACTERS

Chike – The main character of the story, Chike is a young boy who is just at the age to start school. He is the firstborn son to his parents, Amos and Sarah, after five girls, and because of his gender, his birth is a huge occasion to celebrate. His parents' Christian beliefs isolate him from his community, most of whom abide by traditional Igbo values and religion. This causes Chike not to accept food from his neighbors, for instance, because his mother believes that it's heathen since it's offered to traditional Igbo deities. Chike is eager to begin school in spite of his sisters' warnings that the schoolteacher "beats students to death." At school, Chike adores the **songs** he sings with his classmates—especially the ones in English, even though he can't understand or pronounce many of the words. As Chike gets older, he becomes even more fascinated with the English language. His teacher uses long words with his students that impress Chike very much: his favorite words is periwinkle, for example. When Chike gets home from school, he likes to read the stories from his *New Method Reader* schoolbook. Again, many of these don't make sense to him, either, but that doesn't stop him from enjoying reading. What's more, Chike makes up nonsensical songs with the words he's learned that engage his imagination and imbue him with visions of "a strange, magical new world."

Amos – Chike's father. Amos, originally, was a member of the powerful "free-born" social group in the village, but because he chose to marry Sarah, a woman of the lowest-ranking Osu class, he is no longer respected by the community or even his family. He chose his wife because he converted to Christianity, and Mr. Brown, an English missionary in the village, convinced him that Christian values didn't align with traditional class structures. Amos's marriage to Sarah caused a rupture between him and his mother, Elizabeth, who vehemently opposed the union even though she herself had already converted to Christianity. In marrying an Osu woman, Amos accepts the fact that his children will be Osu as well. At the beginning of the story, he is especially happy that his wife has given birth to a son, Chike, after five daughters.

Sarah – Chike's mother. Sarah belongs to the Osu, the lowest social class in the village. However, she has converted to Christianity and no longer believes in the traditional Igbo system. Her newfound beliefs allowed her to marry Amos, even though, traditionally, Osu are forbidden from even lifting their heads in front of members of higher castes, or "free-borns." Sarah's Christianity also leads her to raise her children in ways that isolate them from the rest of the villagers, who still engage in traditional Igbo cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. This

effect of her parenting becomes most obvious when she tells her children not to accept food at their neighbors' houses, because they offer foods to the traditional Igbo gods, whom Sarah refers to as "idols."

Elizabeth – Amos's mother. Like her son, Elizabeth converted to Christianity, presumably thanks to Mr. Brown's influence. However, it is clear that she still invests in traditional religion and social structures when she reacts negatively to Amos's decision to marry Sarah, an Osu. When she learned this, Elizabeth went to village diviner to perform a ritual that would make her son come to his senses. Even though the ritual does not work, Elizabeth leaves Christianity to return to her traditional Igbo faith.

The Diviner – A practitioner of the traditional Igbo religion, the diviner is seen as a wise and powerful man by the people of the village—at least, by those that haven' t converted to Christianity yet. When Elizabeth comes to him, distraught that her son, Amos, will marry Sarah, a member of the lowest social class in Igbo society, the diviner performs a ritual to prevent the marriage from occurring. Even though the ritual doesn't work, Elizabeth still returns to her original faith after her encounter with the diviner. The diviner is seen as a source of power and authority in the village. However, his only appearance in the story is an instance in which he fails to successfully perform a magical ritual, inviting readers to consider the possibility that his authority might not be totally warranted.

Mr. Brown – An English Christian missionary who works in the village, Mr. Brown isn't as appealing to the people for his religious teachings. Rather, they are interested in him due to the clinical dispensary he runs. Like the diviner, then, Mr. Brown exemplifies a figure of power and leadership whose authority may be unearned. At the very least, Mr. Brown's authority isn't fully respected—it seems that at the time the story takes place, most of the villagers have resisted converting to Christianity and still practice their traditional Igbo religion. Amos and Sarah, are exceptions to this, however. Using Christian teachings, Mr. Brown convinces Amos to marry Sarah in spite of her low social standing, and the couple goes on to raise Chike and their five other children as Christians.

The Schoolteacher – Notorious among the village schoolchildren for beating students with his cane, the schoolteacher provides Chike and his peers with their first introduction to the English language. For younger students, the schoolteacher instructs songs about the catechism and Western history—one that is particularly memorable to Chike is about Julius Caesar being the ruler of the world. The schoolteacher is stricter with the older students, using English words to tease and scold them for being late or lazy. He also begins to introduce longer, more complicated English words. Chike notes "periwinkle," "procrastination," and, in the context of a lesson about seed dispersal, the phrase "explosive mechanism."

TERMS

Osu – This term refers to members of the lowest social caste in the village where **Chike** and his family live. Traditionally, in Igbo culture, Osu people are seen as unclean and are not allowed to share space with those that are "freeborn." The lives of Osu people are said to be in service to the deities. In the story, **Amos**'s marriage to **Sarah**, a born Osu, means that Amos and the couple's children (including Chike) are part of this group by default, as well.

Igbo – The Igbo ethnic group is one of the largest tribes in Nigeria. Their population is concentrated in the South and Southeast region of the country. **Chike**'s entire family belongs to this group, and so did Chinua Achebe himself.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

COLONIALISM AS A FORM OF VIOLENCE

In "Chike's School Days," Chinua Achebe paints a portrait of an Igbo Nigerian village through the lens of one young boy's family. Chike starts school at a time when the influence of British colonizers has begun to have a serious impact on the lives of people in his village. Families are ruptured along the lines of members who subscribe to the white man's tradition—the conversion to Christianity, in particular, is presented as a dividing force in the story. The language Achebe uses to describe the impact that English cultural influence has on Chike's village creates images of violence and emphasizes the point that colonialism is, inherently, a destructive force.

Chike is the son of his mother, Sarah, an Osu—a member of the lowest social class—and his father, Amos, a "freeborn". The union of two such people represents a rupture in the hierarchy that maintains the social order of Chike's village. When Amos, tells his mother, Elizabeth, that he intends to marry Sarah, "the shock nearly kill[s] her." The language here is obviously suggestive of violence. Amos's mother's surprise and disappointment at his having made a choice that prioritizes white Western values over traditional Nigerian values almost causes her to metaphorically die. The new generation's embracing of English practices does away with everything the older generation had passed on to them, causing a form of cultural death. Elizabeth's reaction is particularly complex, however, because she herself had already converted to Christianity—the religion whose values allowed Amos to

consider marrying an Osu woman. However, the extent to which her son has adopted these new beliefs affects her strongly, and even causes her to return to "the faith of her people." In this way, Amos's full integration of Christian values creates a rupture between him and his mother. Initially, Elizabeth tries to talk her son out of marrying Sarah, but doesn't get through to him because "his ears had been nailed up." The use of passive voice here makes readers guess at who did this to Amos, the only obvious answer being Mr. Brown, the village's English missionary. The metaphoric use of "nails" is strange, and also references Christianity—Jesus having been nailed to the cross. Thus, the influence of Christianity on Amos is portrayed as violent.

When Chike is preparing to go to school, he is anxious about the stories he's heard about "teachers and their canes," implying that school is a place where violence is inflicted upon the children. Chike's older sisters sang a song in Igbo about the teacher that implied that he "flogged the children to death." The schoolteacher in Chike's village is English like the missionary, and instills fear in the children by using his cane. The implication that an educational system could cause a child to die invites readers to consider that this is, in fact, a metaphorical death. At Chike's school, children are educated by colonizers who intend to disconnect them from their traditional culture. Indeed, Chike's experiences at the school support the suggestion that what happens to the young students there is a metaphorical, cultural death. Immediately following the passage about the song Chike's sisters sang, Achebe describes Chike's experience in "religious class" where he sang the catechism. The parallels here between the song Chike's sisters sang about being flogged to death and Chike's singing Christian songs at school clearly compares Christianity to a form of violence being inflicted on the village people, and especially young children, who are more impressionable than the adults and are responsible for the future of the village.

Finally, toward the end of the story, Achebe creates a metaphor that addresses not just Christianity, but the spread of English culture as a form of violence. One of the lessons Chike learns in school and will "never forget" is about seed dispersal. The teacher lists five methods by which this can take place, the last of which, shockingly, is "by explosive mechanism." The first four items on the list—"by man, by animals, by water, by wind"—are peaceful and mundane, which makes the violence of "explosive mechanism" shocking by contrast. "Seed dispersal" is a clear analogy for colonialism, especially within the school context. Chike and his schoolmates are the seeds of a new generation that embodies English values and cooperates with the colonizers. They are being "dispersed" with violence, as their dispersal is only made possible by the "explosive" destruction of the culture of their ancestors. Immediately following the passage about seed dispersal, readers observe that "Chike was impressed by the teacher's explosive vocabulary." Here, the English language also becomes equated to a weapon. Indeed, the teacher's words and the things he teaches function as tools to separate the children from the society that raised them.

Through sharp metaphors of violence, "Chike's School Days" seeks to paint a portrait of traditional Igbo society slowly being destroyed through colonial influence. Through the destruction of tradition and the British education of children, Achebe illustrates the ways in which the powers of colonialism conquered nations by isolating new generations from their ancestors and the culture from which they came. While the destruction of traditional Igbo culture due to colonizing force is an important theme in Achebe's body of work as a whole, what makes "Chike's School Days" unique is the fact that the story is told through the lens of the child, inviting readers to consider what will grow in the place of a culture that is being destroyed.

LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY

The main point of tension in "Chike's School Days" is between English colonial culture and traditional Igbo culture. Achebe tells the story of a young boy, Chike, raised in a village that is just beginning to feel the full force of British colonizer's culture, especially in the realms of religion and education. Over the course of the story, various characters seek guidance from different community leaders. However, these leaders—both Igbo and British alike—are characterized as unreliable. This demonstrates the tension present in a society divided between two groups seeking to dominate local culture, and suggests that neither will fully succeed in this task. Chike and his generation are raised in a cultural context without clear authority figures or structures, which sets the precedent for their forging a new set of cultural practices and values in the wake of colonialism.

The first authority figure readers are introduced to in the story is Mr. Brown, an English missionary who lives in Chike's village and successfully converted Chike's father, Amos, to Christianity. Mr. Brown is "highly respected by the people" of the village, "not because of his sermons, but because of a dispensary he ran in one of his rooms." Here, the moral authority of anything Mr. Brown would have to say is severely undermined by his manipulative use of medicine to lure local people into engaging with him. The end goal of his supplying medicine to the people is not simply to help them, but rather to convert them to Christianity. However, the inability of the Christian doctrine to convince people in and of itself suggests that it is not—or, at the very least, suggests that Mr. Brown himself is not—suitable to be a source of moral or religious authority within the context of the village. Mr. Brown is directly contrasted with the village "diviner," whom Amos' mother, Elizabeth, goes to see after his son announces that he intends to marry Sarah, a woman of a lower social class.

Unlike Mr. Brown, the diviner is introduced as "a man of great power and wisdom." While readers from the can see from the

very beginning that Mr. Brown is not a credible source of wisdom or authority, initially, the diviner is portrayed as someone who has real potential to be a leader in the community. This represents the narrator's slight privileging of local wisdom traditions and wisdom over Christianity by suggesting that up until now, the local diviner had to effectively lead the people. However, the diviner is ultimately unsuccessful in doing what Elizabeth wants him to do, which is to convince her son not to marry Sarah. The diviner tells Elizabeth to sacrifice a goat, which she does, "but her son remained insane and married an Osu girl." Here, any authority the diviner initially seemed to have is totally undermined. He claimed to have a solution for Elizabeth's problem that was simply ineffective. In the story, then, Christianity and local religion are cast as two competing but equally ineffective sources of leadership and moral authority. Interestingly, even though the diviner's prescription really does not work, Elizabeth returns to practice the traditional faith of her people. This choice on her behalf demonstrates that she does not choose her leadership based on its merit, but as a form of reacting against a rebellious son. Because she has seen that both Christianity and local spirituality have led her and members of her family astray, she cannot fully belief in the merit of either one.

The third and final figure of potential authority in the story is Chike's schoolteacher, who himself does not seem particularly concerned with passing on relevant information to his students. The activities the teacher gives to his students are presented as meaningless, and even absurd. At one point, Chike and his schoolmates must sing a song in Igbo about Julius Caesar. The narrator ironically comments that "it did not matter [...] that in the twentieth century Caesar was no longer ruler of the whole world." In this instance, the schoolteacher is presenting his students with yet another false source of authority. Julius Caesar has nothing to do with the world in which Chike and his peers live, and so presenting him as a source of authority or even a role model is meaningless within this cultural context. In doing this, the teacher also undermines his own authority and potential to be a source of leadership and wisdom for the students. He is not capable of teaching them lessons relevant to their context, and therefore cannot be a helpful guide to them as they grow.

The plethora of unreliable authority figures in the story comes as a result of the attempt on the part of colonial forces to dominate and destroy local cultures. Because of the impact of colonialism, the traditions of wisdom and spirituality that Chike's village community previously had are no longer relevant to the current context. However, because some elements of tradition and local culture are still strong among the villagers, colonial forces are also unable to effectively provide the sort of authority and moral guidance that the children—and the whole community—need in order to grow. This sets the precedent for Chike's generation to create new traditions, sources of wisdom, and means of knowledge production that represent the synthesis of the violent confrontation between the two worlds.

LANGUAGE AND THE STRUGGLE TO CREATE MEANING

In "Chike's School Days," readers glimpse a Nigeran Igbo village that is struggling to integrate British colonial culture into their way of life. In many ways, the introduction of Christianity and British culture seems to destroy traditional practice and beliefs. Alongside that destruction, however, Achebe hints at the necessity of forming new practices and traditions at the intersection of the two cultures. One of the most prevalent ways in which readers observe the destruction of traditional culture, the formation of the new culture is through Achebe's treatment of language, especially in the context of Chike, the protagonist, learning English.

The protagonist's name is the first instance in which readers observe a confused form of language use. Chike's birth is an important occasion, as he is the first boy in the family. His parents give him "three names at his baptism—John, Chike, and Obiajulu. The last name means 'The mind at last is at rest.'" This is significant, because readers understand all of Chike's names except the one which he uses throughout the story. John, readers understand to be a generic, biblical English name, which Chike's parents obviously chose in an effort to integrate Christianity into their family culture. Ojiabulu is an Igbo name, which his parents chose because he was their firstborn son. However, Chike, which is the most prevalent of all three names, remains a mystery to readers. It is seemingly empty of meaning. It is also second in line between Chike's English name and his Igbo name—it exists at the intersection of the two cultures. Chike being placed physically in between the other two names, linking English and Igbo, suggests that the link between the two cultures, the practices that will be created through this intersection, are still unknown. This sets the precedent for a story in which language will be used to name the unknown that exists at the intersection between two cultures. The fact that Ojiabulu means "the mind at last is at rest," is also ironic, as over the course of the story Chike and other characters become more and more confused at the mixture of English and Igbo culture in their town. In other words, the minds of the villagers have never been less at rest. The unsettled quality of the mind becomes most evident in Chike, as he himself struggles with learning the English language. When Chike begins to learn English, he enjoys the language, even though he is initially unable to form words or sentences that actually have meaning.

At school, Chike and his classmates sing "Ten Green Bottles," but the lyrics, pronounced in the children's accent, are "*Ten grin botr angin on dar war*," followed by a middle that is "hummed and hie-ed." Here, it is clear that Chike has no notion of the meaning

of the words, nor is he able to produce the sounds such that they would have meaning to others. When a child from one culture is in the initial stages of learning the tongue of another, there is a period of time when it is impossible to communicate meaning. Chike, in his learning process, doesn't prioritize meaning: his favorite word is "periwinkle," implying that what speaking English means to him is still superficial, about the sound of the words rather than their meaning. Chike's linguistic period of emptiness, meaninglessness, and inability to communicate parallels a similar moment for his village culturally, as the colonial and local cultures collide. They run into each other, each negating the other's significance, creating a cultural void in which meaning needs to be recreated.

Chike's eagerness to learn English eventually develops into what Achebe implies as an eagerness to forge that new culture at the intersection of the preceding two. At the end of the story, Chike makes up a "meaningless song," with English words that is "like a strange window through which he saw in the distance a strange, magical new world." In this moment, language is the lens through which the "new world," forged through the mixing of Igbo and Western traditions, is first glimpsed. The implication is that the language used to create Chike's song, while meaningless now, will become a tool with which to make meaning. The particular language created at the intersection of Igbo and English will, eventually, be used to build a "new world."

While the story ends on a hopeful note from a child's perspective, it is not clear whether the narrator shares that same perspective. The cold and startling reflection that a child's song is "meaningless," suggests that the narrator may be more skeptical of the future that is to come. In either case, though, the mixture of two languages epitomizes the crash of the two cultures—both the meaninglessness that comes from this merging and the necessity to create new cultural significations.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

"Chike's School Days" is a portrait of a Nigerian Igbo community as they navigate the influence of the British in the early stages of colonialism. Building on his examination of the ways in which this Western dominance affects religion, education, and language in Chike's village, Achebe also looks specifically at how these changes affect people on an intimate, relational level. The introduction of Western and Christian values severely alters the ways in which Chike's community is structured, starting at the family level and spreading to disrupt the network of the entire village.

Because Amos, Chike's father, converted to Christianity, his new values allowed him to marry Chike's mother, Sarah, who was born an Osu, meaning she is from a lower, marginalized class. This, in turn, isolates Amos from his own mother. When Amos resolves to marry Sarah, an *Osu*, the narrator observes that "the new religion had gone to his head [...] like palm wine." Although Amos's mother, Elizabeth, had already converted to Christianity when Amos announced his engagement, she was so disappointed by this news that she "went to the diviner." This moment is interesting, because it raises the stakes for what it means to convert to Christianity: Elizabeth was okay with the new faith as long as she was also able to maintain the views of class structure traditional to the village. However, when her son's Christian values come into direct conflict with her own traditional ones, she initially tries to stop him by returning to "the faith of her people," or the diviner. The diviner's spells don't work on Amos, but nonetheless Elizabeth resolves to continue to practice traditional Igbo spirituality. In this way, the introduction of Christianity into village life challenges ancestral understandings of class and the structure of society, and therefore is capable of turning family members against one another.

In part due to his parents' nontraditional marriage, Chike is raised in ways that break with the village traditions of raising children. Because Sarah and Amos are Christians, Sarah tells her children "not to eat in their neighbors' houses because 'they [offer] their food to idols.'" In this way, Sarah "set[s] herself against the age-old custom which regarded children as the common responsibility of all." In doing this, Sarah, perhaps unwittingly, participates in restricting the way in which the Igbo village will conceptualize the family unit. Previously, all families seem to have been united by a collective raising of the children—irrespective of social class, as evidenced by the fact that the neighbors were even willing to offer food to Chike, an *Osu* child. Now, however, Sarah's newfound religious beliefs have caused her to isolate her children from this community, thereby falling into the traditional Western standard of a nuclear family unit. When Chike is offered food from a neighbor in the story and refuses, the neighbor is offended, muttering that "even an *Osu* [is] full of pride nowadays, thanks to the white man." Here, the anger Chike's neighbor feels toward him demonstrates that she, too, wishes to distance herself from Chike and his family—it's not just a one-way aversion. Like Elizabeth, the neighbor dislikes the subversion of traditional social hierarchy, and feels upset about Chike's family because they espouse just that.

Achebe portrays colonialism's breaking up of family and community structures with great complexity. Because he shows both the violent enforcing of British beliefs and the exclusionary nature of the traditional class system, he doesn't specifically endorse one way of living over another. However, he does effectively show the ways in which breaking apart communities is a tool of British colonialism. Considering the themes present in both Achebe's work and postcolonial literature in general, it is important to recognize that this strategy—separating communities and even families, specifically by granting lower classes power they have never had before—is a signature strategy employed by social groups that seek to dominate and or colonize others.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SONGS

In "Chike's School Days," songs represent the broader struggle for the story's Nigerian characters to parse out a sense of meaning or identity for themselves under British colonialism. One example of this is the Christian hymns which Chike's father, Amos, leads the family in morning and night. As one of the only Christian families in their village, these religious songs represent "the ways of the white man" to which Chike's family has conformed. Though representative of their faith, the hymns embody the tension between the family and the traditional culture of their community.

On the other hand, songs also allow Chike and his siblings to retain their Nigerian traditions in a small way. Just before Chike starts school, his sisters use a song in their native Igbo language to warn him about a schoolteacher who supposedly "flogged [...] children to death" with his cane. Though this is clearly an exaggeration, it's significant that the song used to convey the story is in Igbo rather than English, as it suggests that although the children have assimilated to British influence in many respects, their traditional language still serves a fundamental role in communicating information to one another.

When Chike enters school and is introduced to English songs, readers can recognize the use of song to symbolically illustrate the use of language for aesthetic rather than communicative purposes. At school, Chike and his schoolmates sing these songs with heavy accents. Since their mispronunciation is so strong, they are not able to communicate meaning through this song, nor does the teacher seem concerned with explaining the lyrics' meaning to students. Rather, the function of their singing is superficial—the students are made to parrot English songs not to communicate in a meaningful way, but rather to submit to the influence and domination of British colonialism.

Chike's self-invented songs in English also speak to this point. At the end of the story, he reads from his schoolbook and makes up nonsensical, meaningless songs based on words he's heard at school, like "periwinkle." As he is creating these songs, Chike envisions a mysterious new world that makes him happy. Here, Chike's excitement about the future parallels his excitement about English: the language interests him not because he understands it, but because it has come to represent, due to colonialism, an exotic and captivating form of power. The English songs in the story are broken forms of communication that fail to imbue the colonized population with any genuine sense of meaning—rather, their singing only conveys the superficial appearance of assimilation which undermines their traditional culture.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor Books edition of *Girls at War and Other Stories* published in 1991.

Chike's School Days Quotes

"Sarah taught her children not to eat in their neighbors' houses because "they offered their food to idols." And thus she set herself against the age-old custom which regarded children as the common responsibility of all [...]

Related Characters: Chike, Sarah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, readers are introduced to the differences between Chike's parents, who practice Christianity, and other families in their village, who follow traditional Igbo cultural and spiritual practices. Because Sarah has converted to Christianity, she sees the food that the neighbors offer to the Igbo deities to be unclean or heathen and forbids her children from eating it. It is clear that such an action isolates her children from their community, and from being raised in a similar way to their peers. However, more importantly, this change in behavior ruptures the tight-knit, communal structure of their society that is based on Igbo values. Therefore, in prohibiting her children from eating at their neighbors' houses, Sarah is inadvertently furthering the goals of the British colonial influences: she is fracturing and weakening the fabric of her community, which makes it more susceptible to domination. Additionally, by prioritizing her own parenting over the collective raising of children, Sarah mirrors the nuclear family structure common in the Western world at the time the story is set.

"The neighbor was full of rage, but she controlled herself and only muttered under her breath that even an *Osu* was full of pride nowadays, thanks to the white man.

Related Characters: Sarah, Chike

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Chike has just followed his mother, Sarah's advice and refused a piece of yam that a "heathen" neighbor has offered him. The neighbor is offended, not only because Chike refused, but also because of Chike's low social status, he shouldn't have felt comfortable asserting herself to her. At this moment, readers realize that the extent to which Sarah's Christian values have broken from traditional social structure is much deeper than merely parenting her children in an unconventional way. Sarah—and Chike, by extension, as he is her son—is an Osu, or a member of the lowest social class. Therefore, Chike should not even allow her gaze to meet that of "free-borns," members of higher social classes. The neighbor's attributing of this behavior to the "white man" demonstrates the extent to which Chike and his family are, in some ways, tools for British colonialism. They suffer in their community for breaking with tradition, but by subverting the village's norms they weaken community ties, making everyone more susceptible to colonial influence and manipulation.

> It was unheard of for a man to make himself *Osu* in that way, with his eyes wide open. But then Amos was nothing if not mad. The new religion had gone to his head. It was like palm-wine.

Related Characters: Sarah, Amos

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Speaking of the past, the narrator makes clear the extent to which Amos, Chike's father, was seen as foolish and even traitorous for having made the choice to marry an Osu, being a higher-class "free-born" himself. The comparison of Christianity to alcohol serves to illustrate the extent to which the Christian worldview diverges from the Igbo one. Amos, under the influence of his new religion, has chosen to do something that a traditional Igbo man would only do if he were duped or intoxicated. This subtly positions Christianity, and the colonizing missionaries who spread it, as agents of manipulation, and Amos as a manipulated victim. Such an analogy contributes to an understanding of colonialism as a form of violent coercion.

> The only person who supported Amos in his mad marriage venture was Mr. Brown, the white missionary, who lived in a thatch-roofed, red-earth-walled parsonage and was highly respected by the people, not because of his sermons, but because of a dispensary he ran in one of his rooms.

Related Characters: Sarah, Mr. Brown, Amos

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

This passage reveals that Mr. Brown, a white English missionary, was the only person to encourage Amos to marry Sarah even though she was an Osu and Amos was a "free-born." While it is clear that Amos has deeply embraces Mr. Brown's teaching and the values of Christianity, this quote suggests that the other members of the village have not. Rather, they only value Mr. Brown for the material support he is able to provide them with in the form of medicine. In this moment, Achebe sheds light on yet another manipulative strategy colonizers used to lure local people into embracing their culture and values. Mr. Brown is, in a way, trying to buy the loyalty, faith, and attention of the people by providing them with medical assistance they might not have access to otherwise. In this way, the subtle characterization of Amos as a victim is furthered: while other villagers seem to be able to use Mr. Brown to their advantage without being talked into abandoning their own values to embrace his, Amos has, so to speak, fallen into the trap.

> A few days later he told his widowed mother, who had recently been converted to Christianity and had taken the name of Elizabeth. The shock nearly killed her. When she recovered, she went down on her knees and begged Amos not to do this thing. But he would not hear; his ears had been nailed up.

Related Characters: Sarah, Elizabeth, Amos

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

The most notable aspect of this quote is the analogy between colonialism and violence. Hearing that her son will marry an Osu "nearly [kills]" Elizabeth, implying that her son's divergence from the culture he was raised in is a form of violence against those who continue to adhere to the culture. Amos's choice represents the death of Igbo values in him, and, by extension, in all continued generations of his family, as he plans to raise his children Christian. The idea that Amos's ears have been "nailed up" is an unusual metaphor, and it, too, invokes violent imagery. The use of the word "nail" to describe what had blocked Amos's ears alludes to the Christian belief of Jesus being nailed to the cross. In this analogy, then, Achebe positions the Christian faith as a weapon, one that isolates an Igbo son from his mother and his culture. Finally, in a subtler way, the use of the passive voice when describing Elizabeth's conversion to Christianity also serves to position her, like Amos, as a victim. The passive voice robs her of agency, as though conversion to Christianity was not something that she fully chose for herself, but something that was done to her.

> The diviner was a man of great power and wisdom.

Related Characters: Sarah, Amos, Mr. Brown, Elizabeth, The Diviner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

When Elizabeth learns of Amos's intention to marry Sarah, a woman of a much lower social class, she seeks the help of the local diviner to perform a ritual that will prevent the marriage. This introduction of the diviner is notable, mostly because of the passage's stark contrast to the way in which Mr. Brown, the village's Christian missionary, is introduced. Both men seek to hold positions of power, leadership, and authority over the villagers using their religious teachings. However, the narrator's immediate recognition that the villagers principally value Mr. Brown thanks to his dispensary is very different from the narrator's praise of the diviner as being powerful and wise. Through this contrast, readers can recognize that the narrator's perspective aligns with the perspective of the villagers—principally, those who have not converted to Christianity. Were someone like Amos to narrate the story, the descriptions of the two men may have been the opposite.

> Old Elizabeth performed the rites, but her son remained insane and married an *Osu* girl whose name was Sarah. Old Elizabeth renounced her new religion and returned to the faith of her people.

Related Characters: The Diviner, Sarah, Amos, Elizabeth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

While prior to this moment the narrator explicitly characterized the diviner as a man of "great power and wisdom," the revelation that the rites he assigned Elizabeth to complete were unsuccessful undermines this belief. Readers may have been tempted to believe that while Christianity was unhealthy for the community, the traditional Igbo faith was productive for them. However, by casting the diviner as someone who is unsuccessful in his work, or at least someone who is not always successful, Achebe problematizes all forms of faith in the village. Elizabeth's decision to return to her original faith in spite of its inability to help her is puzzling; she has no evidence that the "faith of her people" is any more effective than Christianity. In fact, at this point in the story, all the evidence she has against Christianity is that it caused her son to break with Igbo tradition in ways that were shocking and painful for her, and her traditional spirituality did nothing to help her. In other words, she has valid reasons not to partake in either faith. However, even so, she chooses Igbo religion. This speaks to the lack of reliable authority figures in the village, the extent to which colonialism is able to pull families apart, and the powerful influence of one's native culture even under threat of outside influences.

> It did not matter to their dancing that in the twentieth century Caesar was no longer ruler of the whole world.

Related Characters: The Schoolteacher, Chike

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Chike is in his early school days, in what is called the "religious class." The fact that the school is linked to Christianity invites readers to consider the parallel between the education Chike is experiencing and the conversion to Christianity that his father, Amos, and his grandmother, Elizabeth, experienced—education functions as a tool to immerse Igbo people in Western culture and tradition, as does Mr. Brown's work as a Christian missionary. The detail about the children singing songs related to Julius Caesar provides further evidence for this claim. While Caesar is not a religious figure, he is an icon of Western history, and to have children learning about him at such a young age will likely impress upon them the importance of Western historical figures. However, the narrator's wry comment about Caesar no longer being ruler of the world highlights how irrelevant this education is not only to the modern world, but specifically to Igbo youth.

> According to the teacher, there were five methods: by man, by animals, by water, by wind, and by explosive mechanism. Even those pupils who forgot all the other methods remembered "explosive mechanism."

Related Characters: The Schoolteacher, Chike

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

This moment is one of the most poignant uses of metaphor in the story. Chike's teacher is giving a lesson on seed dispersal, which is a clear analogy for colonialism. At the school, English colonizers are indoctrinating Igbo youth with Western cultural and religious values, planting figurative seeds for Nigeria to become a cooperative and controllable colony of the United Kingdom. The use of the term "explosive mechanism" is jarring in contrast to the previous terms—seed dispersal by man, animals, wind, or water sounds peaceful, whereas "explosive mechanism" comes across as violent. Therefore, this is one of the most explicit instances in which Achebe parallels colonialism with violence. All of the work the schoolteacher does with the students is analogous to the explosive mechanism—the destruction of Igbo culture and its replacement with English values.

> Chike read it over and over again at home and then made a song of it. It was a meaningless song [...] But it was like a window through which he saw in the distance a strange, magical new world. And he was happy.

Related Characters: Chike

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Chike is reading his *New Method Reader* at home after school and inventing nonsensical songs with words lifted from the stories. While in another story this might be illustrated as a sweet moment, a child having fun with his imagination, the narrator's language here is not warm or nostalgic. The observation that the song is "meaningless" is cold and abrupt, and implies that the narrator views Chike's invention of new songs with cynicism. Indeed, Chike's love for the English language is a byproduct of colonial efforts to separate children from their local culture and to align them with English values. What's more, the fact that Chike isn't able to make meaning out of the English language is evidence for the fact that it is not *his* language; it does not serve him in ways that language should. It does not allow him to express himself or to communicate. And yet, Chike's appreciation of English is based on its aesthetic rather than its true meaning. It's likely that due to colonial influences that Chike already associates English with modernity, glamour, and prestige, all as a result of what he learns in school and the way it is taught. While Chike may feel optimistic about the future that is to be created through English language and culture, the narrator clearly adopts a more pessimistic tone, likely foreseeing the erasure of Igbo culture and values as Nigeria becomes increasingly westernized.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHIKE'S SCHOOL DAYS

Chike's birth gives his family cause to celebrate—as the last child in his family, he is the first boy after a string of five girls. His parents, Sarah and Amos, are so happy to have birthed a son that at his baptism, they give him three names: John, Chike, and Obiajulu, which means "the mind is at last at rest."

Here, readers are immediately introduced to the many cultural influences the characters must navigate throughout the story. First of all, the anxiety about not having any male children is a marked characteristic of Igbo culture (although the privileging of sons is by no means exclusive to the Igbo people). Additionally, by giving Chike three names, Sarah and Amos demonstrate their desire both to preserve Igbo culture—Chike and Obiajulu are Igbo names—and to assimilate into English culture with the generic biblical name "John" as the first of Chike's three names.

Although Sarah and Amos still have traditional beliefs about gender, they have chosen to raise their children "in the ways of the white man," different from the "traditional" ways of the others in the village. Chike and his sisters grow up singing Christian **hymns** and praying first thing in the morning. What's more, they're not allowed to accept any food that the neighbors' have offered, as their mother says this food has been "offered to the idols." This sets the family against the time-honored tradition of their community to treat children as "the common responsibility of all."

This passage suggests that Chike and his sisters are isolated from their community due to their parents' Christian beliefs. While it can be assumed that Chike's peers grow up eating in neighbor's houses and being cared for by various adults in the community, Chike and his sisters have only their parents to rely on. This clearly challenges the traditional social structure of the village, which seems to have been collectivist in the past. It can be inferred, then, that if members continue converting to Christianity, relatively isolated nuclear families the village will soon become the norm in the village.

Inevitably, the day arrives when a neighbor offers Chike a piece of yam. Proudly, Chike refuses and replies that his family "doesn't eat heathen food." Offended, the neighbor scoffs that "even an Osu is full of pride these days, thanks to the white man."

This moment further indicates that the way Chike is raised isolates him from his community. It also adds complexity to the idea that the social structures of the village are being challenged—the neighbor alludes to the fact that Chike is an Osu, a member of the lowest class. Therefore, Chike is not only subverting traditional values by not accepting the food of "heathens," but is also subverting the hierarchy that exists among castes in the village by asserting himself to a member of a higher social class.

Indeed, Chike is an Osu, meaning he is a "slave" to his clan and is "despised and almost spat on" by the "free-born" people in the village. In the past, an Osu couldn't marry a free-born, but that is changing. Sarah, Chike's mother, is an Osu, while his father, Amos, was not. But when Amos converted to Christianity, he began to believe it was possible to disrupt the traditional social structures. The village thought he had gone mad to make such a choice, and that the new religion had "gone to his head [...] like palm wine." But with the support of Mr. Brown, a white missionary who lives, practices, and runs a dispensary in the village, Amos stuck to his decision to marry Sarah in spite of her social class.

Amos's decision to marry Sarah reflects the extent to which colonial influence is capable of altering local culture. By choosing to marry Sarah, Amos has perhaps inadvertently chosen to honor the authority of Mr. Brown over the values of his people. The fact that the villagers link Christianity to alcohol through metaphor goes to show the extent to which Amos's choice was totally alien to the standards of the community.

When Amos's mother, Elizabeth, heard about her son's plan to marry an Osu, she refused to go down without a fight. Although she herself had already converted to Christianity, the idea of her son marrying an Osu was unthinkable. She went to consult the diviner, locally recognized as wise and powerful. He performed a ritual and told her to sacrifice a goat to appease the gods, to the end that Amos would call off the wedding. The ritual didn't work, and Amos married Sarah. Elizabeth remained so shocked and disappointed at what Christianity had made her son do that she returned, for good, to "the faith of her people."

In response to what Elizabeth judges as Amos's poor decision, Elizabeth goes to consult the diviner, who functions as the foil of Mr. Brown when it comes to figures of leadership and authority—whereas Mr. Brown represents encroaching Western influences, the diviner represents the village's devotion to their traditional religion. Interestingly, Elizabeth chooses to reconvert to her traditional faith, even though the diviner's ritual doesn't work. This suggests that Amos's decision to go against the community's traditions has so disturbed Elizabeth that she would rather trust in someone who has proven himself to be unreliable rather than stay in the religion that normalizes Amos and Sarah's marriage.

In the present, when Chike is five or six years old, he is finally old enough to study in the village school. He adores his new school clothes and his slate and pencil, eager to begin learning in spite of his older sisters' threatening warnings about the schoolteacher. An Igbo **song** they sing ominously warns that the teacher, with his scary cane, "flogged them to death." Chike suspects they might be exaggerating, but still, the song worries him.

The reference to Chike's school clothes illustrates the subtle influence of colonial culture: these are likely not traditional Igbo clothes, meaning that the schoolchildren are expected to conform to a westernized style of dress in order to attend school. Additionally, even though it is clearly exaggeration, his sisters' inference that the (presumably English) schoolteacher flogged students "to death" is one of the more obvious allusions to colonialism as a form of violence in village life. Finally, the fact that this is communicated through song rather than regular speech nods to the overall challenge characters face in expressing themselves throughout the story.

Because Chike is young, he is first sent to the "religious class." There, he and his fellow students sing and even dance the catechism. Chike doesn't understand the meaning of the English words they use, but he does enjoy the sound and the rhythm. In one Igbo **song** the students sing in class, the teacher asks the students who Julius Caesar is. Chike and his peers reply that he is "ruler of the whole world," although in the 20th century, of course, this is no longer true.

This passage speaks to colonialism as a form of violence. Most notably, Achebe highlights the absurdity of young Igbo children learning about Julius Caesar, who is irrelevant to young children growing up in 20th-century Nigeria. In spite of this fact, Caesar continues to be included on the curriculum due to colonial prioritization of Western culture. What's more, the fact that Chike and his schoolmates presumably don't understand the meanings of the English songs further demonstrates the fact that the colonial instruction the students are receiving is not relevant to them, and only serve as tools of assimilation.

The English **songs** they sing are even more mysterious to Chike. His favorite song is "Ten Green Bottles," though he and his classmates sing with heavy accents and forget many of the words, humming and mumbling the middle of the song.

In this moment, the students' heavy accents betray their inability to discover or create meaning in the English language. This highlights the foreignness of the language they're required to use in school and invites readers to consider how unnatural it is for children to learn the foreign language of their country's colonizers at such a young age.

Chike moves on to Infant School, where the reader "need not follow him" as it is "a full story in itself." though not different from that of any other child. In Primary School, Chike begins to develop individual likes and dislikes. Arithmetic is no good, but he still adores **songs** and stories. Most of all, he likes the way English words sound, "even when they [convey] no meaning at all." "Periwinkle" and "constellation" are among his favorites—even though he doesn't know what these mysterious words really mean, he invents his own "private meaning[s]." He imagines that "periwinkle" has "something to do with fairyland."

Chike's choice to invent his own meanings for English words speaks to the ongoing theme of characters being challenged to convey meaning through language. Because English is not Chike's native language—rather, it is imposed on him through colonialism—Chike is forced to create his own definitions. This speaks to the innovation that always exists at the merging of two cultures: words are re-signified, and through this resignification, new forms of meaning are produced that are original to neither British nor Igbo culture.

The schoolteacher has a huge vocabulary that really impresses Chike. He likes to use big, impressive words from his dictionary to make fun of students or punish them for being late. One lesson that stuck with Chike forever was the one about seed dispersal, which could happen through "five methods: by man, by animals, by water, by wind, and by explosive mechanism." Even for the students who forget the other methods, "explosive mechanism" sticks in their memories.

The teacher's quote about "seed dispersal" is one of the most salient moments of the story. Seed dispersal itself is an easy analogy for colonialism: the schoolteacher's job is essentially to planting the figurative seed for Igbo children to be dependent on and tied to English culture. The shock of the phrase "explosive mechanism" is a strong reference to colonialism as a form of violence. Achebe doesn't even explain what is meant by "explosive mechanism," but the clear violence in that phrase provides a harrowing analogy for how religion, language, and other customs are forcibly and often violently spread through colonialism.

When he gets home from school, Chike likes to read from his *New Method Reader*, stories that to him are like fairytales, something from a completely different world. Once he's done reading, his favorite thing to do is to make up **songs** out of the things he's read. The songs are "meaningless," but still, they are like "a window through which he [sees] in the distance a strange, magical new world." The vision of this new world makes Chike happy.

Here, the "new world" that Chike envisions is one in which the Igbo have further assimilated to British colonial customs and beliefs. In the moment the story is narrated, this world does not yet exist, and therefore cannot yet be conceived of by Chike or even the adults in his family. It exists at an intersection between languages and cultures that has not yet been reached. The cold dismissiveness of the narrator's description of a song made up by a child as "meaningless" is intentionally cynical. It suggests that although Chike may be excited about the new world that is to come, the narrator has reservations, and likely suspects that the violent destruction of Igbo traditions will prove detrimental to the continued existence of Chike's culture.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Ogunseitan, Coryna. "*Chike's School Days*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 Oct 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Ogunseitan, Coryna. "*Chike's School Days*." LitCharts LLC, October 25, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/chike-s-school-days.

To cite any of the quotes from *Chike's School Days* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Achebe, Chinua. Chike's School Days. Anchor Books. 1991.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Achebe, Chinua. Chike's School Days. New York: Anchor Books. 1991.