

Summary Notes on Pre-IB English 2's Informal Research Topics (2025)

Igbo Culture — Spelled “Ibo” within the novel, Okonkwo’s native culture is profoundly significant to any reader’s experience with the novel.

Art and Architecture:

The Igbo people are renowned for their intricate wooden and fabric masks used in rituals, plays, and second burials, each representing distinct cultural characters. They employ artistic techniques such as the lost-wax process for bronze casting and uli (body paint) during symbolic events like weddings and funerals. These art forms serve to strengthen community ties, connect traditions, and impart moral lessons. A large part of Igbo art includes the use of masks, sculptures, and textiles, which hold cultural and religious significance within their communities.

Societal Roles:

Traditionally, Igbo society is patriarchal, with men serving as yam farmers, warriors, hunters, craftsmen, and medicine men. Women manage household tasks, childbearing, and simple farming jobs; notably, both genders can hold significant religious roles. Social hierarchy is influenced by lineage, community contributions, age, and family size, with status often linked to the number of wives, children, and yams owned. The Igbo people value family, community, and tradition, with strong spiritual beliefs connected to nature and ancestors.

Religion and Beliefs:

The Igbo practice a polytheistic belief system centered on nature-related deities, such as Ala, the Earth goddess. Ancestral worship is prevalent, with the belief that ancestors influence the lives of the living. The New Yam Festival is celebrated annually to thank deities for a bountiful harvest, showcasing the integration of religion with agriculture. The arrival of British missionaries significantly influenced the Igbo, introducing Christianity and altering traditional religious practices.

Community Life:

Igbo communities are typically village-based, organized into clusters of clay and straw huts. There is a strong emphasis on family bonds, respect for elders, communal labor, and participation in town meetings to maintain social cohesion.

Cuisine and Agriculture:

Staple crops include yams (considered a “man’s crop”), cassava, taro, corn, melons, pumpkins, beans, and palm wine. Traditional dishes feature starchy foods like ofe oha (a traditional soup), pounded yams, peppers, and tubers, often complemented by palm wine. Agricultural practices involve crop rotation and strategies to maintain soil fertility, with farming adapted to regional climates.

Nigerian History (1800s) — The time period in which the novel is set was a time of great change around the world; the territory now known as Nigeria likewise underwent significant changes.

Colonial Influence:

British colonization began in 1861 with the establishment of the Lagos Colony, expanding through the Royal Niger Company's control of trade routes. Resource extraction, including palm oil, rubber, tin, and timber, significantly reshaped Nigeria's economy to serve British industrial needs. The introduction of Western culture, Christianity, and British legal systems disrupted traditional customs and coexisted with Islamic law in the north. British colonial rule created lasting political and ethnic tensions in Nigeria, which continue to affect the country's stability today.

Political and Social Structures:

Nigeria was not a unified nation but a collection of kingdoms and communities with decentralized and highly centralized governance systems. British indirect rule maintained local leaders (chiefs and elders) for administrative control, creating layers of power influenced by both colonial and traditional authorities. Social hierarchy was shaped by lineage, religious status, and community contributions, reinforcing existing inequalities. Before colonization, Nigeria had thriving kingdoms and trade networks. British intervention disrupted these systems, exploiting resources and imposing artificial political boundaries.

Conflicts and Resistance:

The Anglo-Aro War between the British and the Aro Confederacy marked a turning point, allowing the British to expand trade and influence. Internal conflicts, such as the Igbo-Igala Wars and Yoruba Wars, were fought over territorial disputes and trade dominance, often exacerbated by colonial interference. In the 1800s, Nigeria experienced conflicts fueled by British colonization, including disputes over land, resources, and cultural differences.

Nigerian History (1950s) — The time period in which a 20-something Chinua Achebe actually wrote this novel likely shaped some of the themes that you find present within.

Path to Independence:

The 1954 Freedom Constitution laid the foundation for Nigeria's self-governance, introducing a federal structure and regional autonomy. Nigeria held its first federal and regional elections in the 1950s, leading to full independence from Britain on October 1, 1960. The 1950s marked the beginning of Nigeria's movement toward independence, with political leaders advocating for self-rule and national unity.

Economic Developments:

The discovery of oil dramatically boosted Nigeria's economy, with profits shared between the government and foreign oil companies, increasing national revenue. Expansion of trade infrastructure, including ports and railways, facilitated industrial growth focused on exporting oil and agricultural products. The Nigerian economy began shifting from agriculture to include industrial development, influenced by British economic policies and investments during the late colonial period.

Political Changes:

Growth of political parties and constitutional reforms promoted democratic governance and national unity. Protests, activism, and nationalist movements played crucial roles in challenging British colonial rule and advocating for independence.

Tragedy Narratives — Like *Frankenstein*, *Things Fall Apart* is also a tragedy. This type of story is an old one, and it's important to understand both its content and form.

Literary Themes:

Tragedy often centers on a noble hero's downfall, driven by personal flaws (tragic flaws or *hamartia*, as Aristotle would've called it) or external forces, evoking pity and fear in the audience. Classic examples include *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Oedipus Rex*, where protagonists face inevitable suffering due to their inherent flaws and choices. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's pride, fear of weakness, and resistance to change mirror the tragic hero archetype, leading to his downfall. A tragedy narrative focuses on the downfall of a protagonist, often caused by a combination of personal flaws, poor decisions, and uncontrollable external forces.

Cultural Impact:

Tragedy explores universal themes of human suffering, existential challenges, and the fragility of life, fostering emotional connections across cultures and time periods. It examines how individuals respond to loss, failure, and adversity, often highlighting moral lessons or critiques of societal norms. Tragedies explore the emotional consequences of loss and failure, highlighting how grief, guilt, and desperation can drive characters to act in ways they normally wouldn't.

Relation to *Things Fall Apart*:

Okonkwo embodies the tragic hero, whose admirable traits—strength, leadership, and determination—are undermined by his tragic flaws. His personal downfall reflects the broader collapse of Igbo society during colonial disruption, blending individual tragedy with cultural disintegration. The purpose of tragedy is to reflect on human nature, fate, and the consequences of choices, offering lessons about resilience, morality, and the complexity of the human experience.

Postcolonial Literature — The intent behind these stories is what makes them different. As Adichie argues in her TED talk, it's dangerous to only be exposed to a single, nearsighted perspective; conversely, postcolonial literature aims to tell previously ignored narratives.

Themes and Concepts:

Postcolonial literature addresses issues of identity, cultural conflict, and the lasting effects of colonization on formerly colonized societies. It explores hybrid identities, where indigenous cultures merge with colonial influences, leading to complex negotiations of self-representation and belonging. Central themes include resistance to oppression, the struggle for independence, and the reassertion of cultural heritage. Postcolonial literature explores how colonized people view themselves compared to how colonizers portrayed them, focusing on themes of identity, cultural conflict, and resistance. Its purpose is to give a voice to those who were silenced during colonial rule, showcasing their experiences, struggles for independence, and efforts to preserve their cultural heritage.

Literary Movements:

Négritude, a literary and philosophical movement, advocated for the recognition of African cultural identity and heritage during decolonization. Postcolonial works often emphasize resilience and resistance, giving voice to marginalized groups and challenging colonial narratives.

Examples and Influence:

Notable African postcolonial works include *God of Mercy* by Okezie Nwoka, *The Fishermen* by Chigozie Obioma, and *Wizard of the Crow* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, all exploring the complexities of postcolonial identity. Caribbean postcolonial literature, with authors like George Lamming and V.S. Naipaul, examines similar themes of cultural hybridity, colonial legacy, and the quest for autonomy. Examples of postcolonial African literature also include *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ, and *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih, which examine the effects of colonialism on identity, culture, and society. Popular media like Disney's *Pocahontas* and the *Avatar* films likewise ask viewers to reexamine the way they view the rights and wrongs of history.