Lesson 1: Mapping the Changing Face of Africa through History: Pre-Colonial, European Colonization, and Independent Nations

In his essay "Issues in African History", located on the EDSITEment-reviewed resource Art and Life in Africa Online, Professor James Giblin of the University of Iowa Department of History writes about the European “Scramble for Africa” (1880-1910) and the Berlin Act of 1885, which created a set of European-controlled nation-states that arbitrarily combined into one country diverse African ethnic groups, on one hand, and divided linguistic and ethnic communities, on the other:

"Africa's integration into a European-dominated economy has shaped its history since the 1880s. During the last quarter of the 19th century, Europe became increasing interested in exerting direct control over the Africa’s raw materials and markets. European heads of state laid down ground rules for the colonial conquest of Africa at the Congress of Berlin in 1884-5. Over the next twenty years, all of Africa except Ethiopia and Liberia was violently conquered, despite many instances of African resistance. The British and French established the largest African empires, although the Portuguese, Belgians and Germans claimed major colonial possessions as well."

You might point out to the class that the cultural, religious, linguistic, and other historical divisions among ethnic groups have continued to challenge and blur the colonial borders of many African Nation-States, during colonization and especially after Independence.

Things Fall Apart takes place during Europe's violent partitioning of Africa at the end of the 19th century, and Achebe wrote and published the novel towards the end of the colonial period, during a time of burgeoning nationalism across Africa:

"African frustration was compounded by the inconsistency between, on the one hand, universalistic Christian ideals (for Christianity spread widely during the colonial period, as did Islam) and liberal political ideas which colonialism introduced into Africa, and, on the other hand, the discrimination and racism which marked colonialism everywhere. This discrepancy deepened during the Second World War, when the British and French exhorted their African subjects to provide military service and labor for a war effort which was intended, in part, to uphold the principle of national self-determination. Post-war Africans were well aware that they were being denied the very rights for which they and their colonial masters had fought.

This deepening sense of frustration and injustice set in motion the events which would lead to national independence for most of Africa by the mid-1960s" ("Issues in African History").

To give students an idea of contemporary African geography as well as of the cultural and political changes that Africa has undergone as a continent over the past two centuries, provide the class with maps of Africa before, during, and after colonization, and assign the following activities:

Download and distribute to each student a copy of the African Continent Map.Gif located on the Multimedia Archive, available through the EDSITEment-reviewed resource African Studies WWW. This map indicates the outline of countries in Africa but is blank inside. Have students identify as many
African countries as possible, filling in the names of the countries on the map. Ask them if they can identify any languages spoken in specific countries, and have them write these down on their maps as well. Write down the names of the countries that students were able to identify. Which countries are they? Where did they get their information, from school, their families or acquaintances, the news? Ask the class what they know about the countries they were able to identify on the map and from which sources they received their information.

Using a computer projection, individual or small group computer stations, or printed out copies, use the maps of Africa from 1688 and 1909, which you can find on the Map Collections 1500-1999 at the EDSITEment-reviewed resource American Memory Collection by conducting a Search by Keyword for "Africa."

For both of these maps, you can select the desired zoom level and window size to increase the detail of the displayed image and the size of the map, respectively. If you click in the Zoom View window and then click on the image, the display will be centered on the selected part of the map. You can select an area in the small Navigator View map so that the red box on the Navigator View will indicate the area of the image being viewed in the larger Zoom View.

Another pre-colonial map, The Continent of Africa from 1707 by Tobias Lotter, is located on Hemispheres, Antique Maps and Prints, available through the EDSITEment-reviewed resource Internet Public Library.

Show the class the Map of Africa 1688 or 1707, before colonization by Europe, and the Map of Africa 1909, which shows the continent divided up among British, French, Italian, German, Portuguese, and Spanish Colonies, the Belgian Congo, and Independent African States. Ask students to compare the maps: What differences do they notice? What similarities?

A map of post-colonial Africa showing the different countries, updated in 1998, is available on the Countries Resources page of the EDSITEment-reviewed resource Art and Life in Africa Online. A larger version of this map is available at Africa.gif, from CIA Maps, located on the Multimedia Archive, available through the EDSITEment-reviewed resource African Studies WWW.

Have the class compare the contemporary map with the two earlier maps and discuss the changes in the geo-political divisions of the African continent. Then ask students to look over their original maps and fill in the names of the countries that they missed in their first mapping activity. You can note to students that African ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups have resisted the geo-political boundaries of many Nation-States created under colonization; for instance, the borders of West Africa set in place under colonialism are often contrary to the area's cultural and political reality (See Robert Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy" Atlantic Monthly Feb. 1994 Rpt. Atlantic Online, available through the EDSITEment-reviewed resource Internet Public Library.

To give students an overview of Nigerian history and cultural geography, locate Nigeria on a map of Africa from the EDSITEment-reviewed resource Art and Life in Africa Online: Countries' Resources. Then present a map of Nigeria itself on the Nigeria Information page, and point out the Igbo area. This page provides a map and general information about Nigeria, including descriptions of its four main ethnic groups: Yoruba, Igbo, Fulani, and Hausa, and the Igbo Information page from the Peoples Resources section of the site offers information about the ethnic group described in Things Fall Apart.
You can point out the vast ethnic (Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Fulani among many other peoples), religious (Muslim 50%, Christian 40%, African religion 10%), and linguistic diversity (515 listed languages, 505 of which are living languages) of present-day Nigeria using the Languages of Nigeria and Languages of Nigeria Map pages available through the EDSITEment-reviewed resource African Studies WWW. The Languages of Africa map provides a graphic depiction the many different languages spoken across Nigeria, with individual dots representing the primary location of a living language.

In an August 2002 interview “An African Voice”, published in The Atlantic Online, available through the EDSITEment-reviewed resource Internet Public Library, Achebe explains the fundamental and far-reaching disruption of African societies and social orders through European colonization:

"The society of Umuofia, the village in Things Fall Apart, was totally disrupted by the coming of the European government, missionary Christianity, and so on. That was not a temporary disturbance; it was a once and for all alteration of their society. To give you the example of Nigeria, where the novel is set, the Igbo people had organized themselves in small units, in small towns and villages, each self-governed. With the coming of the British, Igbo land as a whole was incorporated into a totally different polity, to be called Nigeria, with a whole lot of other people with whom the Igbo people had not had direct contact before. The result of that was not something from which you could recover, really. You had to learn a totally new reality, and accommodate yourself to the demands of this new reality, which is the state called Nigeria. Various nationalities, each of which had its own independent life, were forced by the British to live with people of different customs and habits and priorities and religions. And then at independence, fifty years later, they were suddenly on their own again. They began all over again to learn the rules of independence. The problems that Nigeria is having today could be seen as resulting from this effort that was initiated by colonial rule to create a new nation."

Ask students to note places in the text that foreshadow this disruption, this replacement of one reality with another, as they read the novel. For example, Achebe's first reference to the character Ikemefuna as “ill-fated,” at the end of Chapter 1, foreshadows the boy's death and Okonkwo's son Nwoye's troubled response in Chapter 7, which in turn foreshadows Nwoye's conversion to Christianity and joining the missionaries in Chapter 16. In Chapters 16 through 18, Achebe indicates the ways in which the Europeans separated Nigerians of different clans and ethnic backgrounds and turned them against their own people and villages through their appeal to the village outcasts and by “teaching young Christians to read and write.” Another example of how Achebe foreshadows the alteration of indigenous society is the replacement by “the white man's court” of the clan's customs with their own laws, discussed in Chapter 20. Obierika explains: "He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."

Lesson 2: Telling One's Own Story: Differing Perspectives

One theme that appears over and over in Achebe's writing is that our perceptions and the stories we tell are shaped by our social and cultural context, and he emphasizes that, "those that have been written about should also participate in the making of these stories" ("An African Voice").

Achebe writes his own history of colonization in order to present a perspective different from those taught in the Western literary and historical traditions. However, the text of Things Fall Apart provides a range of perspectives through its narrator and many characters. To create a framework for interpreting the conflict within and between values and cultures that Achebe addresses, engage
students in a discussion of perspective/standpoint, and provide them an opportunity to analyze and then take on the perspective of one of the characters in the novel.

Ask the class, “Who is the narrator/speaker in the novel? Do the narrator's position, perspective, and identity remain constant or change throughout the narrative? What other characters' views are represented and used to convey the novel's insights and to give readers a certain viewpoint on Igbo society and the class with the British missionaries?”

Ask students to take up a character in the novel, such as Okonkwo, Obierika, Unoka, Ekwefi, Ezinma, Nwoye, or Ikemefuna, and rewrite a scene from his or her voice and position. To help students approach this activity, ask them why they chose a certain character, what role the character plays in the novel, and which scene would be appropriate to rewrite from this character's perspective. (The confrontations between the white men and the Igbo people are good incidents to use for the rewrite, as they can reinforce the colonialist/native point of view issue of the lesson.)

Use the character's actions, observations about the character made by other characters or by the character him- or herself within the text, narrative description, and your own impressions to describe the character and infer a point of view. To aid them in recognizing and adopting the point of view of one of the characters, have students fill out the Character Traits Chart, available in pdf format.

Lesson 3: Revising History Through Writing

In an interview in the 1994-95 issue of The Paris Review, Chinua Achebe states that he became a writer in order to tell his story and the story of his people from his own viewpoint. He explains the danger of having one’s story told only by others through the following proverb: “until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” Critics and Achebe's own essays have portrayed Things Fall Apart as a response to the ideologies and discursive strategies of colonial writing and constitutes a different story or counter-narrative to the European texts. Ask the class to note the ways in which Achebe represents African culture and the African landscape, and to give textual examples of ways in which he employs narrative techniques that contest colonialist discourse. (Some examples are Achebe's use of simple, ordinary prose and a restrained mode of narration; the omission of exotic descriptions; creation of a subjectivity for his major characters; inclusion of a specific cultural and temporal context of the Igbo and Umuofia; presentation of the complexities and the contradictions of a traditional Igbo community without idealizing; introduction of white Europeans into the story from the Igbo population's perspective.)

In order to introduce students to colonial writing and thought, assign one or both of the following texts for them to read and analyze in relation to Things Fall Apart:

You may choose to assign Conrad's novella Heart of Darkness (1899), available online at the Electronic Text Center, available through the EDSITEment-reviewed resource Center for the Liberal Arts, to your students to read. In conjunction with the novella, students can read the essay, "Achebe on Racism in Heart of Darkness", available through the EDSITEment-reviewed resource Victorian Web.
After reading *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart*, students can respond to the following questions about themes and literary techniques on the chart comparing *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart* provided in pdf format as well as in Flash interactive format:

1. What is the moral dilemma presented within each work?
2. How do the two texts represent Christianity versus African religious belief and practice?
3. How do they approach the relationship between the community and the individual?

As an alternate to *Heart of Darkness*, Rudyard Kipling's poem, *The White Man's Burden*, (Click 'Some Poems' then 'The White Man's Burden.') located on The Kipling Organization, available through the EDSITEment-reviewed resource The Academy of American Poets, constitutes a brief but significant example of colonial literature. Note that Kipling is writing about India rather than African countries, but that both situations are examples of nineteenth-century British Empire and colonial relations.

Ask students the following questions about the poem in comparison to *Things Fall Apart*: What is "the white man's burden" within the poem? How does the poem portray non-white peoples? What is the narrator's attitude towards Empire and colonialism? How does this attitude compare with that of the narrator in *Things Fall Apart*? How are the Europeans' views of Africans and the Africans' views of whites represented in the novel? How is *Things Fall Apart* a response to and a revision of the view of non-white people as represented in "The White Man's Burden"?

To elucidate Kipling's view of British Imperialism, have students read the essays "Kipling's Imperialism" and "The British Empire in Kipling's Day", available through the EDSITEment-reviewed resource Victorian Web.