

A Man of the People Study Guide

A Man of the People by Chinua Achebe

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Contents

A Man of the People Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	7
Chapter 3.....	9
Chapter 4.....	12
Chapter 5.....	14
Chapter 6.....	16
Chapter 7.....	18
Chapter 8.....	20
Chapter 9.....	21
Chapter 10.....	23
Chapter 11.....	25
Chapter 12.....	27
Chapter 13.....	29
Characters.....	31
Objects/Places.....	34
Themes.....	35
Style.....	38
Quotes.....	40
Topics for Discussion.....	42



Plot Summary

A Man of the People was written by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe in 1966. The book is narrated by Odili, a young teacher in an unnamed African country run by greedy and corrupt politicians. His own former teacher, referred to as both “Mr. Nanga” and “Chief Nanga,” is now an elected official and the Minister of Culture of the country. When Chief Nanga comes to visit his home village, he and Odili meet again, and Chief Nanga invites Odili to stay at his home in the capital city while the Chief makes arrangements to help Odili study abroad. Despite his dislike for Chief Nanga’s politics and his way of doing business, Odili is somewhat charmed by the man. He is also attracted to a young woman, Edna, who travels with Chief Nanga and is supposed to become the Chief’s second wife.

Odili accepts Chief Nanga’s invitation, and spends time with him in the capital city. Odili learns that Chief Nanga lives in luxury as a result of his corrupt practices and knows very little about culture, despite his position. Odili has had an affair with a young woman, Elsie, whom he brings to Chief Nanga’s home with the intention of spending the night with her. However, she sleeps with Chief Nanga instead. Chief Nanga doesn’t understand why this makes Odili angry. Odili decides he will take revenge on Chief Nanga by seducing Edna, the young woman the official plans to marry.

Odili becomes involved in a new political party that seeks to replace the current ruling party. As he becomes more and more opposed to Chief Nanga, Odili decides to run for office in an attempt to take Chief Nanga’s position. The members of the new party believe they will provide more effective, more honest government. However, Odili learns the people of his country are quite cynical. They expect politicians will take bribes and make themselves rich. In fact, many of the people Odili meets are primarily interested in getting a share of the money gathered by corrupt officials.

Odili struggles with a number of moral decisions as he wages his campaign, for example having to decide whether to take money as a payment for withdrawing from the election. He tries to show the people the present government is lying and stealing, but no one seems to care. In fact, Odili is threatened and bullied as he tries to run his campaign, and his father and his village are punished for his actions.

Odili realizes he is genuinely in love with Edna, and his desire for her is no longer just a result of his wish to get revenge on Chief Nanga. Edna, however, feels obligated to marry the Chief because he has given her family money and her father is pressuring her.

Odili decides to attend the event that launches Chief Nanga’s campaign, where Odili is recognized and beaten nearly to death. During the weeks of his recovery in the hospital, things change in Odili’s personal life and for the entire country. Although Chief Nanga’s party wins the election, the aftermath is unrest and chaos, and ultimately the military overthrows the government. Then the people of the country come forward and talk about how terrible the former government was, despite their support for the same



elected officials when they were in power. Edna stands by Odili through his recovery, and eventually his family makes arrangements for Odili to marry her. Odili is sad to learn of the death of his friend Max, who was killed by a former government official, but reflects an honorable death is about the best one can hope for in so corrupt a country.

Note on Language

This book is written in British-style English, so the reader may notice some of the spelling and punctuation is different from American English. There are also a few unfamiliar words, such as “lorry” instead of “truck.” In the dialogue, the characters occasionally speak in pidgin, which is not a true language, but a local variation on English that may be a bit difficult for the reader to understand. However, even without understanding every word, the reader can usually get the basic meaning of the dialogue.



Chapter 1

Summary

In an unnamed African country in the mid-1960s, a politician referred to as Chief Nanga makes a visit to his home village of Anata. The narrator of the book, a young teacher named Odili, remembers Mr. Nanga was his teacher many years ago. However, Odili now believes Mr. Nanga is corrupt, and Odili looks with contempt at the villagers who are making a great fuss over Mr. Nanga's visit. Odili makes fun of the school's principal, Mr. Nwege, who was trying to make a big deal of his support for Chief Nanga in hopes of being given a civil service position.

Odili recalls how he had become disillusioned in 1960 when the Prime Minister of the country refused to cut coffee prices, a move recommended by economic experts for the good of the country, because it would make him unpopular with coffee growers and thereby make it less likely he would be re-elected. Mr. Nanga, who was by then a member of Parliament, backed the Prime Minister in ridiculing the government officials who opposed him. The press and the reigning politicians used lies to discredit those who tried to speak the truth. In fact, the truth-tellers were accused of not being true Africans, and were called "conspirators and traitors." Mr. Nanga even called for them to be hanged, and for his support of the Prime Minister, he was later appointed to be a Minister in the government.

Despite all this, when Chief Nanga comes to visit the school in which Odili is teaching, Odili is moved by the politician's charming personality and flattered that Chief Nanga remembers him from his school days. Chief Nanga invites Odili to be his guest in the capital city and recommends him for a civil service post. Odili is also impressed by a beautiful young girl who accompanies Mr. Nanga, and tries to find out who she is. He is told she is Mr. Nanga's girlfriend.

Analysis

This chapter introduces the title character. Chief Nanga (also referred to as "the Minister" because he holds an important government position) is called "the most approachable politician in the country." Odili is initially disgusted that Chief Nanga is considered a "man of the people," for Odili believes Chief Nanga is corrupt and that he participated in a shameful episode in which government officials who tried to do their best for the country were humiliated and discredited. Odili is disappointed in both the Prime Minister and Mr. Nanga, because Odili was taken in by their lies at first. Because Odili had visited the Parliament on the day all this happened, he realized the newspaper's version was completely untrue, and he lost respect for the governing party.

As the narrator, Odili looks down on the villagers and the principal of the school where he teaches for their fussing over Mr. Nanga. He believes they have been deceived by



this politician. Therefore, Odili himself is surprised when he falls somewhat under the spell of the charismatic Mr. Nanga. He starts to question whether he has been too harsh in his judgment of the Minister. The author, Achebe, shows very clearly how Mr. Nanga wins the favor and affection of the crowd and begins to appeal to Odili as well. Chief Nanga uses humor and speaks in the dialect of the common people, making fun of those who have more education than he. He shows respect for the elderly and gives money to the crowd.

We are introduced to Odili's wit and humor in this chapter as well. He throws in little jabs when talking about those he does not respect. We also get a feeling for the village and the country where the story takes place, as well as the time frame in which the book is set. Achebe provides the background information to help us understand Odili's mixed feelings – he remembers his affection for Mr. Nanga as a teacher and is flattered by his attention when they meet again, but he also understands Chief Nanga is not an honest man and puts his own interests ahead of those of the country.

Vocabulary

dais, enmity, regalia, tumult, bulwark, saboteurs, miscreants, alienates, nefarious, unedifying, ostensibly, vehemently, damask, malevolence, loquacious, fulsome, vaingloriously, hackneyed, environs, restive, onomatopoeic, vernacular, palaver, discordant, acme



Chapter 2

Summary

Odili had applied for a scholarship to attend a post-graduate program in London, and he says it never occurred to him to ask for the Minister's help in getting admitted to the program. Mr. Nanga suggests Odili can come to the capital city and stay in his guest-room, and the Minister says he will see if he can help Odili study in London. Mr. Nanga is planning to go to the United States in two months, so he makes it clear he wants Odili to visit him as soon as the school term is over. When the Minister leaves, Mr. Nwege, the school principal, shows he is somewhat jealous and angry about the attention that Mr. Nanga gave to Odili. Odili understands, because Mr. Nwege was the one who made a big deal about the Minister's visit, but all he really got for his trouble was to evoke derision. Mr. Nwege also feels humiliated because the teachers at the school didn't seem to show the proper respect for the Minister's visit.

Odili's friend Andrew comes to visit him, and they joke around with Odili's house-boy, a fifteen-year-old named Peter who works for Odili as a house servant. Peter is a smart boy and has some education. He reads a lot, and is interested in learning how to attract girls. Andrew tells Odili that Mr. Nanga is planning to marry Edna, the girl who accompanied Chief Nanga on his visit and was so attractive to Odili. She will become the Minister's second wife. Odili thinks about his upcoming trip to the capital and about another girl, Elsie, with whom he has been involved. Despite the fact that Elsie was engaged when Odili met her, they slept together before they had known each other a full hour. She was a student nurse at the university Odili attended, and they became "friends with benefits." Elsi is now working at a hospital in the capital city. Odili makes plans to go to the capital and stay in the Minister's guest quarters, where he can spend time with Elsie when she isn't working.

Andrew talks about how he had offended Mr. Nanga during his visit by calling him by his old nickname, "M.A. Minus Opportunity." Odili thinks it is odd Andrew is so proud of having bothered the Minister, when Andrew had not been willing to join Odili in protesting the principal's plan to have all the teachers line up to honor Chief Nanga when he arrived.

Analysis

We learn a little more about Odili's character and experiences in this chapter. Odili makes it very clear he has some pride about his academic accomplishments and doesn't feel he needs help from Mr. Nanga to get the post-graduate scholarship in London. Visiting Europe is actually more important to Odili than the academic program itself. Mr. Nanga makes a point of inviting Odili to the capital city to try to help him with the scholarship application, which makes the principal, Mr. Nwege, very mad. Odili



shows some empathy for Mr. Nwege, who had hoped to win favor with the Minister and be allowed to make some money selling surplus government items.

In the scene at Odili's home, we see his easy, friendly relationship with his house-boy, Peter, and Odili's friend, Andrew. The three of them joke with and tease each other. While it is apparently common in this culture for a middle-class person such as a teacher to have a live-in servant, Odili shows he is true to his principles about the value of the common people by treating Peter as a valued individual rather than a person of lower status. Andrew teases Odili for accepting Mr. Nanga's offer of a place to stay, but Odili shows his pride by making it clear he doesn't want anyone to think the Minister is buying his loyalty with favors.

The story about Elsie is told in a humorous fashion. Odili is obviously very attracted to her and a little jealous of her fiancé, who is in Scotland studying, but for the most part he takes a light-hearted approach to the relationship. He doesn't get offended when he is teased by his friends because Elsie cries out exuberantly with sexual satisfaction – in fact, he is rather proud of himself.

Odili explains why the Minister had been so offended when Andrew jokingly called him by his old nickname. Because Mr. Nanga's initials were M.A., he used to joke about his lack of education by saying "minus opportunity" when someone used his initials (which are also an abbreviation for a graduate degree). Now, Mr. Nanga no longer finds it amusing, because of the "anti-intellectual feeling in the country," and can't admit he would have welcomed the opportunity for more education. Despite this, Mr. Nanga is very pleased and excited that he is going to be given an honorary degree by a small college in the United States, and Odili sees that this means the Minister is not clear within himself about whether or not education is important.

Vocabulary

autonomy, wistfully, malevolent, obsequious, ostentatiously, dilapidated, sallied, buffoon, discomfiture, rogue, feigning, rebuked, conjugal, adept, arrears, vivacious, daft, precipitous, inane, albeit



Chapter 3

Summary

Before traveling to the capital city, Odili visits his home village, both to see his father and to take his house-boy Peter to his own home for the holidays. As Peter buys gifts for his parents, Odili thinks about his own family relationships. Odili's mother, his father's second wife, died at Odili's birth, which made the villagers consider Odili to be an unlucky child. His father's first wife, whom everyone called "Mama," raised Odili as her own.

Odili's father was a District Interpreter, a powerful man who served as the link to the white people who were truly in power. People sought the father's favor, but he was also hated by many. When Odili was in secondary school (high school), he lived at school and was invited to go to the nearby home of one of his classmates during a school holiday. When the friend's father found out who Odili's father was, he insisted Odili leave his home immediately.

Odili sees that his father's desire for more and more wives and children is his downfall. His father has recently married his fifth wife, and has fathered 35 children. He can't support his family on his government pension, and he and Odili had a serious argument when Odili challenged his father on the wisdom of marrying again. Mama insisted that Odili apologize and make up with his father, but his father does not approve of Odili's interest in education. He thinks Odili should just give up teaching and get a government job.

When Odili arrives at the capital, he is worried that Chief Nanga has forgotten his invitation. However, he is warmly welcomed by the Minister and his wife and children. Chief Nanga takes Odili to see Chief Koko, the Minister for Overseas Training, to help Odili achieve his goal of going to London to study. Chief Koko drinks some coffee, and immediately begins screaming he has been poisoned and is going to die. There is a lot of commotion, and Chief Nanga yells at someone on the phone and threatens to kill the cook. It turns out that the cook had simply run out of their usual brand of coffee and had substituted some locally produced coffee. This is funny to Odili, because the government has been making a big effort to get people to use locally produced goods, even to the extent of having cars with loudspeakers drive around advertising local products.

When Odili is back at Chief Nanga's house, he asks Mrs. Nanga about a picture of the young woman he was so attracted to, and she confirms the beautiful girl, Edna, is to become Mr. Nanga's second wife. Odili goes to bed, and is struck by the beauty and luxury of the Minister's home. He thinks about the contrast between this luxury and the way most people live in their largely poverty-stricken country, and realizes how tempting the money gained from political corruption must be.



Analysis

This chapter is both touching and amusing. The author shows us how very different the culture in this mythical African country is from our own. The most obvious difference is the acceptance of one man having many wives. This possibility causes trouble for Odili's father, who has more wives and children than he can afford. We learn Odili is blamed (and in some ways blames himself) for the death of his mother during childbirth, which reveals the acceptance of traditional African beliefs by the villagers. Achebe describes the benefits and dangers of Odili's father's position as a District Interpreter, who has power because he had access to the whites who ruled the country. People brought Odili's family not only gifts of food and livestock, but also offered their children to become servants in the household. When Odili tries to speak the truth to his father about his father's inability to afford another wife, his father becomes furious. Odili indicates it will be many years after the time frame he is describing before he learns to stand up to his father. This is one of the first instances of foreshadowing in the book, and gives the impression that the story is being told by Odili in his later years. We learn a bit more about Odili's character in this chapter, where he shows pride about his ability to earn scholarships on his own and the resolve to pursue higher education despite his father's lack of respect for education.

In the story about Chief Koko believing he was poisoned, Achebe makes fun of the government's push to have people buy locally produced products, including coffee, only to have an official think the local coffee was so bad it was going to kill him. He also begins to show more of Mr. Nanga's character. Odili realizes the Minister becomes mean when he is frightened. On the other hand, Mr. Nanga gives Odili a warm welcome, and apparently Mrs. Nanga loves her husband and is tolerant of the demands of his job. Odili's thoughts provide insight into the issue of a few people being in power and having great wealth in a country where so many people are poor. Odili is impressed with the luxurious house of the Minister and begins to see how this luxury would be hard to give up. Achebe uses the metaphor of a man coming in from the rain (which represents poverty and hard times) to a shelter built by the former rulers of the country, and then the new occupants of the shelter won't let anyone else in. In the same way, the new rulers of this African country set themselves up in luxury after winning independence from the white colonial rulers, and then tried to persuade the common people to join together in support of the ruling class.

After these deep thoughts by Odili, Achebe humanizes the story and injects a little humor by saying that Odili was mostly thinking of Elsie. Achebe tries to balance the analysis of very serious issues like government corruption with the engaging story of a young man who sees the funny side of things and is a sympathetic character. This keeps the book from seeming too dry and boring, while it still addresses important issues.

Vocabulary

deity, supplicant, wooed, malevolence, stalwart, matronly, pidgin, belied, ironic, emancipation, mirage, vicariously, bravado, subvert



Chapter 4

Summary

Odili sleeps late the next morning, but the Minister is out of the house bright and early to go to his office. Mrs. Nanga says she is taking the children home for a visit to her village for a few days. She does this at least once a year so that the children will be aware of their roots and not become too disdainful of the humble life in the country. Odili is pleased Mrs. Nanga is going away, because this clears the way for Elsie to visit him at his guest suite, which he is sure she wouldn't do if his hostess were at home.

Odili talks about the contrasts in his country. He is staying in a mansion with seven bathrooms, but reads in the newspapers there are very strict guidelines for toilet pails, which are regulated by the City Engineer. Odili recalls being 12 years old and staying with his older half-sister and her husband in another town. He had to use a bucket latrine and was completely disgusted by it and by the smell of the town when the workers who collected the "night soil" went on strike. He remembers living in a two-room house and having to deal with an infestation of rats.

Odili is a fascinated observer of Chief Nanga's government activities. He hears the Minister negotiating for the completion of a road in his district, which was supposed to be paved before the next election. An American couple comes to the Nangas' house, calling the Minister and his wife by their first names in unusual informality. The American man, John, tries to convince Odili the racial issue in the United States is not so bad, and is improving rapidly. John also says America could have conquered Russia by using atomic bombs in the 1940s, but chose not to. The American woman, Jean, is flirting with Chief Nanga. Meanwhile, a young man comes to apply for the position of cook for the household. He talks about how he cooks only European dishes, not common everyday fare, which he leaves to his wife to prepare. Odili observes by making only fancy food, the man can convince himself he is not doing "such an unmanly thing as cooking."

Analysis

In this chapter, Achebe describes in great detail the poverty and primitive sanitary conditions in most of the country, while his primary character muses about the contrasts between the rich and the poor. It is clear politicians are part of this division of wealth. It seems to be common practice to use bribery and to make decisions (about the building of roads, for example) based on political advantage. There is also the country's love-hate relationship with the European way of doing things. Chief Nanga helped to promote a local man as a road expert, but then dismissed the man's advice to delay building the road until more testing was completed. The Minister said he preferred to deal with Europeans. In addition, the Minister has ordered ten luxury buses to travel on the new road, borrowing money from a British company to do so.



This clash of cultures and the confusion about which culture is best continues as a theme throughout this chapter. Mrs. Nanga describes her children's contempt for their grandmother who still lives in the village. She tries to keep her children from rejecting their own culture by taking them on annual visits, and punishes her son when he says something demeaning about his grandmother. When the American couple comes into the picture, they seem to be totally clueless about etiquette in the country they are visiting, and Odili is surprised Chief Nanga seems more flattered than offended by their behavior. The American man is somewhat boastful about his country and minimizes the issues of racial strife. The theme of being false and full of pride is carried further by the man who is applying for the cook's position. He sees himself as being of higher status because he cooks European foods rather than the everyday African foods people eat in their homes. The humorous twist is that the man doesn't get the job because Chief Nanga prefers everyday food.

Vocabulary

indulgently, immaculate, rebuke, aggrieved, dynamism, abdication, emergent, inexhaustible, decadent, contorted, rampaging, cowed, bumptious, eloquent, magnanimity, monologue



Chapter 5

Summary

Jean and John, the American couple, invite Odili and the Minister to a dinner party on Saturday, the day Mrs. Nanga leaves on her trip. John is unexpectedly out of town for business, and the Minister has a last-minute visitor (a lady lawyer), so Odili goes to the dinner by himself. There are five other guests. Odili thinks the food is not so great, but the talk is enjoyable. He is a bit intimidated by the sophisticated guests at first, but is able to gain their respect when he explains an African woman's reaction to a new statue was not an angry one, but rather a sign of honor and respect. The guests seem very interested in Odili then, and ask him many questions about himself. There is an American Negro (as he is called in the book) at the party, and he describes how a white American approached him at a hotel, but then left quickly when he discovered the black man was just another American.

Jean invites Odili to stay after the other guests have left, and they wind up in bed together. In the middle of the night, Jean takes Odili for a ride around the city before driving him back to the home where he is staying. She has been in the capital city for nearly a year, and knows it well. She shows him both the nicer areas and the slums. Despite the fact that she irritates him at times, Odili asks if he can see her again.

Analysis

In this chapter, Achebe shows the complicated relationships between foreigners and Africans. On the one hand, the Americans feel free to comment on African culture, but on the other, they haven't taken the time to learn enough to make accurate observations about what they are seeing. Odili is attractive to the two American women, but he doubts they would have been interested in him had he been a black American, and indeed the black American at the party tells a story in which another American loses interest when he learns the black man is not African. Achebe describes Odili's perception that Jean is trying to do an African dance, but she overdoes it and (while she looks sexy to him), she is inaccurate and unsubtle in the way she does the dance. All of these events show that while the Americans appear to appreciate the African people and their customs, their arrogance gets in the way of their forming a true image of the country, and so their appreciation is not really authentic.

Jean is knowledgeable about the city, which at first seems positive to Odili, but as she criticizes aspects of the city, he begins to feel defensive. While he feels free to criticize his country, just as people like to complain about their families, he doesn't want an outsider to be judgmental, because he still loves his country. It is okay for Odili to laugh at the absurdities of his country, but it stings when an American does so. Nonetheless, Odili is a passionate young man, and he is interested in seeing Jean again because of his sexual attraction to her.

Vocabulary

solicitors, phonetics, ecstatically, illiterate, digress, disdain, ideologies, convulsed, vehemently, self-righteously, espousing, recoiled, peevish



Chapter 6

Summary

Odili makes plans to meet his friend Elsie, who was an important reason for his trip to the capital city. He travels in the Minister's chauffeured limousine to the hospital where Elsie works. Odili had made arrangements for Elsie to bring a female friend with her during a planned visit to the Minister's house, with the understanding this would be something of a "double date" with the Minister. Odili and Chief Nanga had told each other stories of the women they had been with, and apparently Chief Nanga (despite being married) has had sexual relationships with quite a few women. Odili and the Minister go to the hospital to pick up the young women, but Elsie's friend is sick and can't go. They all go to a book exhibition, where Chief Nanga is to make a speech. Despite being Minister of Culture, he seems to know very little about literature, and is more concerned about whether or not the author is dressed appropriately for the occasion.

The author who speaks at the book exhibition has made Odili's acquaintance before, but doesn't seem to remember him. During his speech, the Minister reveals his ignorance about the writer, but the audience takes it as a joke. Odili notices Jean and her husband are in the audience. He has told his friend Elsie about the dinner party and that there was an American woman also named Elsie who was also a guest. Elsie shows a bit of jealousy about the two American women. Odili notices a man dressed in traditional African robes with borders that say "100% Wool: Made in England."

Analysis

Odili begins to see the advantages of power when he rides in the Minister's chauffeured limousine to the hospital where Elsie works, and the guard allows them to drive in. Ordinarily, they would not have been admitted because of the time. Odili is glad to see Elsie, but he allows himself to speak of her as a "good time girl" to the Minister when the two of them are bragging to each other about the women they have slept with. Odili doesn't seem bothered by Chief Nanga's infidelity, and even plans to set him up with a friend of Elsie's. Despite the status differences between the two men, they seem to have bonded over the issue of sex.

Achebe describes the casualness with which Chief Nanga approaches his speaking duties and his lack of knowledge or sophistication about literature, even though he is the Minister of Culture. The audience is also shown to be easily fooled, because they think Chief Nanga is joking when he misunderstands the content of the book.

The description of the African man wearing traditional robes made from European wool (with the English labeling used as decoration) shows the odd relationship of the African and European cultures, and what Odili describes as "our people's endless



resourcefulness.” So within the same chapter, Achebe shows both the strength and the foolishness of the country’s people.

Vocabulary

mandibular, namesake, tactical, proprietary, derogatory, rhapsodized, commiseration, pretentious, conciliatory, inauspicious



Chapter 7

Summary

Odili is surprised Chief Nanga, who is basically ignorant about literature, is so well-received by the crowd at the book exhibition. Odili is present when a newspaper editor meets with Chief Nanga, who gives the editor money to prevent the newspaper from publishing a critical article. On the ride back to the Nangas' residence, Odili is anticipating a night of lovemaking with Elsie. The Chief has made arrangements for her to stay in his wife's room since his wife is away, and Odili believes this is just a way to make it less obvious that everyone expects he (Odili) and Elsie will spend the night together. However, when Odili sneaks up to Elsie's room, he hears her talking and laughing with Chief Nanga. Odili tries to convince himself this is just an innocent conversation, but eventually he hears Elsie cry out in passion. Odili is furious and very, very upset. He packs all his belongings, and goes out walking through the city. When he returns, he confronts Chief Nanga, who acts very surprised, saying that both Odili and Elsie had assured him their relationship was not serious, so he doesn't understand why Odili would mind Chief Nanga sleeping with her.

Odili leaves Chief Nanga's house and goes to the home of his friend Maxwell, a lawyer whose nickname used to be Cool Max. Max is glad to see him, and makes Odili welcome before leaving to go to court.

Analysis

This chapter shows in greater detail how Chief Nanga charms the public despite his lack of knowledge, and the way he goes along with the system of bribery in exchange for favorable treatment by the press. In addition to charming the public, Chief Nanga has managed to create a seemingly positive relationship with Odili, who has started to feel sympathetic toward the Minister. However, all of this is shattered when Chief Nanga disregards Odili's youthful desire for Elsie, infuriating the younger man. Despite the fact Odili has said he is not serious about Elsie, he feels very possessive of her and can't believe Chief Nanga would be so insensitive and disrespectful toward him. It never occurs to Odili that his boastful conversation with Chief Nanga about his sexual conquests may have contributed to the Chief's belief that Elsie meant very little to Odili.

It is interesting despite Odili's political principles, he is able to overlook Chief Nanga's corruption and ignorance, and only distances himself from the Minister when he feels personally insulted. It's also interesting Odili had no reservations about sleeping with Elsie, who is engaged to another man, but was furious when she did the same thing to him. Achebe pokes a little fun at his main character by having Elsie call out Odili's name while she is with Chief Nanga. Odili found it somewhat amusing Elsie called out her fiancé's name while making love to Odili, but it is not at all funny to him when he is the



one being betrayed. Achebe is able to show the complexities of his characters, who are neither all good nor all bad.

Vocabulary

Indulgent, formidable, arrears, despondency, proprietary, garb, deferential, comported, imminent, transfixed, retrospect, siphoned, revulsion, ordure, inconsequential, reconciliation, stalwart, menace, passable



Chapter 8

Summary

Odili settles in at Max's house, but he begins obsessing about the way in which Chief Nanga has humiliated him. He is particularly insulted because the Chief told him he assumed Odili had gone to his room because he was tired, and therefore Odili wouldn't mind Chief Nanga being with Elsie. Odili decides the way to get his revenge is to seek out Edna, the young woman Chief Nanga intends to make his second wife.

Max returns home. That evening, a few people assemble at Max's house to start a new political party, the Common People's Convention. Odili asks them how they can represent the common people when they are all professionals, but they assure him they are just getting things started, and all will be welcome once the party is established. In fact, Max tells Odili he is pleased Odili is joining them, because he thinks Odili would be a good party representative for his district. Max and Odili remember the high hopes they had for their country seven years earlier when Independence was new. Odili is surprised to hear the new political party includes a man who is an official in the present ruling party, and wonders why that man doesn't just resign. Max explains it is hard for politicians to give up their posts in the current government, because the corrupt system allows them to live so very well.

Analysis

There is a parallel between the personal and the political in this chapter. Odili decides the way to handle his humiliation by Chief Nanga is to try to seduce Chief Nanga's fiancée, thus using the very same tactics Odili finds so disturbing. Likewise, politically, a group of people who were originally very idealistic about the changes needed in the country are now rationalizing their own actions, which bear a surprising resemblance to the way the ruling party behaves. Achebe does not identify the similarity between the two situations, but he clearly describes how in both, the characters seem to be unaware of their own failings, while being critical of the actions of others.

Vocabulary

flatulence, effrontery, preposterous, propound, vanguard, outrage, prophesy, stagnation, dirge, plundered



Chapter 9

Summary

Odili returns to the village of Anata and finds the villagers in an uproar. Josiah, the local shopkeeper, has tricked a blind beggar and stolen the beggar's walking stick. Apparently the belief is the stick can be used to make a medicine to increase people's desire to buy from the shop. The villagers are angry and disgusted with Josiah's greed. A villager says, "Josiah has taken away enough for the owner to notice," meaning while the people would tolerate a little dishonesty, the shopkeeper has crossed a line and people will not forgive him. Everyone avoids Josiah's shop, which goes out of business in a few days.

Odili begins to follow up on his plan of seducing Edna, the young woman who is supposed to become Chief Nanga's second wife, or "parlour-wife." He goes to visit Mrs. Nanga, who realizes Chief Nanga wants to marry Edna because she is younger and better educated, and will make him look better as a politician. Mrs. Nanga is somewhat bitter about this, but accepts the plan. Odili decides he may be able to convince Edna to delay the marriage, and he goes to Edna's home. Odili is excited to see Edna, but must deal with her father, who is convinced Edna's marriage to Chief Nanga will bring him great wealth. In order to see Edna alone, Odili gives her a ride to the hospital on his bicycle, so Edna can visit her mother and take her food. However, while trying to avoid some sheep in the road, Odili has an accident. The food is ruined and Edna is bruised. Odili offers to buy food for her mother.

Analysis

The story of Josiah the shopkeeper is a metaphor for the people's tolerance of corruption in politics. They are willing to overlook a little greed and self-interest, but when a person goes too far, the people will turn against him. Odili thinks about the proverb of the man who takes things away until finally the owner realizes what is happening. He says, "the owner, I discovered, is the will of the whole people." As the villagers boycott Josiah's store and force him out of business, Achebe is leading up to the idea that the people of this country will finally get so disgusted with the enormous corruption of its leaders they will no longer tolerate it. The people expect politicians to obtain some personal gain, but when the politicians get too greedy, the people will reject them.

Greed is also a theme in the story of Edna's father. He is pressing his daughter to become Chief Nanga's wife because the father thinks he will share Chief Nanga's riches. We see some of the extremes in this country, where Chief Nanga lives in luxury but Edna's mother, who is sick and in the hospital, must rely on her daughter to bring her food for survival. Odili shows some of his own arrogance and pride in this chapter as he tries to manipulate Mrs. Nanga and Edna's father. He also tries to impress Edna



by pretending he can ride his bicycle better than he really can. Some of the pride is knocked out of him by a few sheep, showing there are always unknown factors that can interfere with plans that people make.

Vocabulary

gesticulation, gyre, abomination, incongruous, strenuous, levity, feigned, depletion, avaricious, augured



Chapter 10

Summary

Odili decides to visit Mrs. Nanga on Christmas because he learns Edna will also be visiting that day. A drunken relative has come to try to persuade Mrs. Nanga to give him money. Odili has to wait quite a while for Edna to arrive, and finally he has the opportunity to tell her he thinks she should delay her marriage and see more of the world. Edna tells him she feels obligated to marry Chief Nanga because he paid for her education and her father is pressuring her to marry. Odili tries to put his arm around Edna, but she pushes him away.

Things are changing rapidly in the country. The corruption of several major politicians, including Chief Nanga, is exposed by the press. The whole country is in turmoil. Odili goes back to the capital city to help with the beginning of the new political party, the Common People's Convention, or C.P.C. He is excited at the prospect of change. The C.P.C. gives Odili a brand new car. Odili writes a long letter to Edna, telling her why she should not marry Chief Nanga. Then Odili decides he will run against Chief Nanga for his political position, his seat in Parliament. He starts campaigning, only to be ridiculed in the village of Anata. The principal of the school in which Odili teaches fires him from his job. Odili goes to see Mrs. Nanga, who is very angry at him for challenging her husband. Then he goes to Edna's home, despite the fact that Edna's father threw him out a few days prior and told him never to return. Edna desperately tries to get Odili to leave, but he pays no attention to her fear. Edna's father tells Odili to quit the election, although the father wouldn't mind having some of the money Odili has been given to run for office.

Analysis

In this chapter, Odili and Edna are getting to know each other a little better, although there are many obstacles to their relationship. Odili is determined to win her away from Chief Nanga. He tries to present himself as a concerned friend who is giving Edna advice for her sake alone, while in reality he is trying to end her relationship with Chief Nanga for his own reasons. It doesn't seem to trouble Odili's conscience that he is not being truthful or really getting to know Edna as a person. He is also disrespectful of her wishes and unconcerned about her fear when she begs him to leave before her father returns. Here Achebe presents Odili, who is a sympathetic character, as being personally manipulative even while he looks down on others for being dishonest about their own motives.

The action in this chapter then shifts to give the reader a view of what is happening in the country. Achebe describes the excitement and energy of a country finally waking up to the corruption taking place and is now preparing for change. We also see that there are still people, like Chief Nanga's drunken relative and Edna's father, who are mostly



interested in getting a share of the wealth of corrupt politicians. Achebe again uses foreshadowing in giving hints about the deterioration of Odili's relationship with Edna's father. The reader sees a more positive side of Odili's character as he endures the ridicule of others to pursue his political goal.

Vocabulary

vernacular, affluence, conceded, disciples, polygamist, brusquely, precipitous, innuendo, exhilarated, lethargy, constituency, inaugural, boisterously, conspiratorial, tormentor, venom, assailant



Chapter 11

Summary

Odili realizes that he has begun to care for Edna as a person, not just as a means of revenge against Chief Nanga. Odili considers the changes in the country and the changes in himself. When he first went to the University, Odili expected he would graduate and get a professional job and have a nice comfortable life. However, he became more radical while in college and decided to turn his back on middle-class privileges such as a car. Now he is driving the car given to him by his political party, and enjoying it.

Edna sends Odili a letter that basically says she feels that she must marry Chief Nanga. Odili tries to analyze the letter to figure out what Edna really feels about him. As Odili prepares to start his campaign, he realizes he is in danger and hires several armed bodyguards. One of the bodyguards wants to go burn Chief Nanga's car, but Odili tells him not to. Odili is surprised his own father, who is active in a rival political party, is glad Odili is going into politics. Chief Nanga meets with Odili and his father and tries to give Odili money in exchange for his backing out of the campaign. Chief Nanga tells Odili his friend Max has already taken a bribe to step down from the election, but Odili doesn't believe this. Despite his father's encouragement to accept the money and withdraw from the race, Odili refuses it.

Analysis

Odili discovers the difficult realities of politics in his country when he has to hire armed guards to travel with him on his campaign. Odili is trying to hold onto his own principles in the midst of enormous change. He realizes even driving around in a car violates the beliefs he had just a few short years ago. He wants to win the election, but will not let his bodyguard resort to violence. In contrast to Odili's father, who is pleased because he thinks his son will be getting rich and doesn't really care so much about Odili's political beliefs, Odili sticks to his principles by refusing to leave the campaign when Chief Nanga tries to pay him to do so.

We see Odili's excessive pride in his own courage, but that courage is real enough. Odili does have the willingness to examine his own motives, trying to figure out how he really feels about Edna and whether his quest for political office is simply part of his desire to hurt Chief Nanga. A major theme of this chapter is change. Odili changed while he was at the university, becoming more concerned with principles rather than with his own comfort. Now he is changing again, trying to stay true to his principles while also needing to manage his life in the real world.

Vocabulary

ferret, corroding, bourgeois, annihilate, abdicate, mainspring, lair, putrid, affability, interceding, exulting, onslaught, joviality, woefully, detractors



Chapter 12

Summary

Odili's father gives Odili a hard time for not taking the bribe offered by Chief Nanga for withdrawing from the race. Max and the campaign team arrive with several new vehicles and decide to launch Odili's campaign right from Odili's father's home. Odili doesn't think Max's speech is persuading the townspeople to support their party. Max accuses the current government of corruption, but the people seem to expect that politicians will be taking something for themselves; as long as the people think that their own lives are improving, they don't seem to care too much about the politicians' growing wealth. In fact, one villager seems to be in favor of Odili's candidacy because he thinks having a local man in government will ensure the village gets a bigger share of money.

Odili is shocked when Max tells him he should have taken the money Chief Nanga offered. Max doesn't see any moral problem with taking the money of the corrupt ruling party under false pretenses, and has done it himself. Odili believes this is wrong.

Odili is envious of Max's relationship with his fiancée and decides he will tell Edna he loves her and wants them to be together. When he arrives at Edna's house, however, she verbally attacks him and Odili sees this as a win for Chief Nanga. Odili listens to the news on the radio, but there is never any mention of his campaign. Instead, Odili's father is removed from his office in the ruling party and Odili's hometown is deprived of the new water system that was being built.

Analysis

In this chapter, Odili begins to see the people of his country are totally aware of the corruption of their government officials, and they don't really object. They just want what they see as their share. Odili's idealism is challenged by this realization and by the knowledge his friend Max is willing to lie and take money from their rivals. Odili begins to see how powerful Chief Nanga and his party truly are when no news of the new party is aired on the radio, and Odili's father and his village are harmed by those in power. In this chapter, Achebe presents a chilling view of how those in power are able to control others.

A major theme in the chapter is Odili's disillusionment as he realizes people are not clearly divided into those who are good and those who are evil. He starts to recognize even the people he admires, like Max, don't always stick to their principles. He also begins to understand his new political party can't simply "save" the people from the corrupt officials who are currently running the country, because the people themselves share in that corruption.

Vocabulary

conciliatory, patron, rebuke, dignitaries, vociferous, swindling, paupers, slack, reprimand, regime, surreptitious, corrugated, jeopardize, grandiloquent, countenance, incoherent, nebulous, avidly, tacit, ignominiously, palaver, culmination



Chapter 13

Summary

Odili's village announces it is totally in support of Chief Nanga, and some of the materials for the new water system are returned to the village. An official approaches Odili's father and asks him to sign a paper stating the launching of Odili's campaign happened without his knowledge. To Odili's surprise, his father refuses to sign, even though he will have to pay additional taxes as a consequence. Odili questions whether he has been fair in condemning his father in the past.

Odili, wearing a disguise, goes to the big event designed to kick off Chief Nanga's campaign. There is a huge mob there, but someone recognizes Odili and he is pushed forward to the stage, where Chief Nanga ridicules him and Odili is badly beaten by Nanga's supporters. The only one who comes to his defense is Edna. Odili spends several weeks in the hospital, where he discovers he was under arrest because weapons were found in his car at the rally for Chief Nanga (the charges are eventually dismissed). Odili learns Max was killed by a vehicle belonging to a government official, Chief Koko. Max's fiancée, Eunice, then shot and killed Chief Koko.

After the election, the government is brought down by the military regime, taking advantage of the unrest caused by the thugs who had been part of the election itself. All political parties are abolished, and the people of the country begin to talk about how bad and wicked the previous government had been. Chief Nanga slinks away, disgraced. Edna stands by Odili, and his family arranges for Odili and Edna to be married. Odili is saddened by Max's death, but considers him to have been a courageous man.

Analysis

This is an action-packed, dramatic conclusion to the book. Achebe describes in detail the rottenness of the country's people who have allowed a corrupt government to exist, only to eagerly condemn it when a new regime takes power. He contrasts this ugliness with the strength and courage of a few good individuals. Odili, despite his character flaws, stands up to the bully Chief Nanga and is nearly killed for his troubles. Odili's father, who has his own faults, ultimately chooses to stand up for his son. Edna shows her strength of character by trying to defend Odili and then deciding she wants to marry him. Max is also portrayed as a courageous individual. Despite the fact Max was willing to take money under false pretenses, Odili sees Max as a hero and rejoices that Eunice killed Max's murderer. The message Achebe gives is people as a whole may be corrupt and will support what they see to be in their own self-interest, but individuals, flawed as they are, can be noble.



Vocabulary

Rustic, irrevocably, implicit, renegade, acrid, matriarchal, superseded, enumerated, jubilant, cranium, petulantly, importunity, tinder, marauder, subversion, restive, reminiscence, acquiescence, graft, adulation, culprit, sacrilege, redress



Characters

Odili Samalu

Odili is a young teacher who has become disillusioned with the current government of his country. While he was a university student, Odili realized the politicians who ran his country were corrupt and interested only in increasing their own wealth, not in helping the people. At the start of the book, Odili is politically idealistic, and he truly wants to help improve the lives of the people in his country. However, he is also a young man who is full of lust and pride. He sometimes manipulates other people and wants to impress others. He is thoughtful and well-educated, but sometimes he is blind to his own shortcomings. Over the course of the novel, he matures and changes. His idealism is tested and he discovers personal integrity and courage are of great importance.

Chief Nanga

Chief Nanga is the “man of the people” referred to in the title. He is a charismatic politician, and the people love him. He is also corrupt and sees no problem with living in luxury while many of his constituents are terribly poor. He is the Minister of Culture, which is ironic because he knows very little about culture. He is married, but seeks to marry a second wife who will enhance his status. He is also a womanizer who boasts to Odili about his sexual conquests.

Chief Nanga is a “larger than life” character in this book. His personality is so strong that Odili learns to like him despite their political differences, but then Chief Nanga becomes the target of Odili’s revenge after he sleeps with Odili’s friend Elsie. Chief Nanga came from a desperately poor background himself, but seems to have little concern for the needs of poor people. He makes fun of people who are educated, but is excited that he is supposed to receive an honorary doctorate from an American college. The reader sees glimpses of his anger and meanness as well, especially during a scene when he is frightened. Like most bullies, Chief Nanga is not truly brave.

Elsie

Elsie is an uninhibited young woman who is a friend of Odili’s. The two of them have a sexual relationship, but she is engaged to another man and Odili doesn’t regard their relationship as serious, although he is terribly offended when she sleeps with Chief Nanga. After this happens, Odili is angry at her as well as the Chief, and he ends their friendship without a second thought.



Edna

Edna is a beautiful young woman who catches Odili's eye early in the book. She is supposed to become Chief Nanga's second wife, and she feels obligated because Chief Nanga paid for her education and gave her very poor family some money. Odili pursues her at first because he wants to hurt Chief Nanga, but eventually they grow to love each other and Edna shows her courage in standing by Odili.

We learn about Edna's character through her actions. She is concerned about her mother, who is in the hospital, and is determined to bring her mother food. She is afraid of her father, but also respects his opinion. She is largely motivated by a sense of obligation and wants to do the right thing, even at her own expense.

Mrs. Nanga

Mrs. Nanga, the Chief's wife, is supportive of her husband but is hurt when he wants to take a second wife who is better educated and more sophisticated than she. Mrs. Nanga is the mother of seven children, and takes them for regular visits to her home village so that they won't become arrogant after experiencing city life. Mrs. Nanga is kind to Odili, but becomes angry at him when Odili decides to run for office against her husband. She is portrayed as a down-to-earth, loyal woman who is not well treated by her husband.

Odili's Father

Odili's father, Mr. Samalu, is a former District Interpreter who is involved with the ruling political party. He has many wives and 35 children, and he disapproves of Odili's idealism. He and Odili have a strained relationship, but at the end of the book, Mr. Samalu decides to stand by his son, and Odili realizes he has judged his father too harshly.

Max and Eunice

Max, a classmate of Odili's, is one of the founders of the new political party formed to challenge the corrupt administration. He is a lawyer and is engaged to Eunice. While Odili is disappointed Max is willing to take money from the ruling party under false pretenses, Max shows great courage and loses his life for his cause. Eunice shoots the politician responsible for Max's death. While Achebe does not give us much information about Eunice, we learn she and Max have a good relationship and she is ultimately one of the heroes of the book.

Mr. Nwege

Mr. Nwege is the principal of the school at which Odili teaches. He makes a big fuss over Chief Nanga when the Chief comes to town, in the hope of getting a government contract allowing him to make a great deal of money. However, Mr. Nwege is ignored and ridiculed rather than rewarded for his loyalty to Chief Nanga.



Objects/Places

Anata

Anata is Chief Nanga's home village and the site of the school where Odili teaches.

Chief Nanga's House

Chief Nanga's house in the capital city is a luxurious mansion, compared to the substandard housing in which most of his poor countrymen live.

Urua

Urua is Odili's home village, where his father still lives.

Bori

Bori is the capital city of the unnamed country in Africa where this story takes place. It is the site of Chief Nanga's luxurious home, but it is also a city with areas of great poverty and poor sanitation.

Poisoned Coffee

This coffee was not really poisoned, but was so bad it was thought to be poisoned. It was actually just local coffee, which the government had promoted as a good product, but which had a terrible taste.

Josiah's Store

Josiah is a merchant in Anata. His store goes out of business after the villagers learn that Josiah tried to trick a blind man.

Odo's House

Odo is Edna's father, and Odili goes to their home several times to try to see Edna.

The Brand-New Volkswagen

This is the car given to Odili by his political party. It is a symbol of the bourgeois privilege which he had sworn to give up when he was at the University.



Themes

Greed and Corruption

The mythical country in which this novel is set has recently won its independence from white colonial rule. Under that rule, the majority of the people were kept in oppression and poverty, while a few of the native people of the country had power because they served the white masters. When the country gained independence, those in power focused on feathering their own nests by taking bribes and amassing wealth. Chief Nanga is a prime example of this, because he lives in luxury while those he is supposed to serve are barely scraping by. Odili's own father, who was a District Interpreter, was given many gifts by those attempting to win favor. Even the policemen who are supposed to protect citizens turn and walk away when Odili is being beaten, presumably because they are paid to do so by Chief Nanga.

What is even more disturbing to Odili than the corruption of politicians is the acceptance of this corruption by the people. They are not surprised or shocked that government officials are taking bribes and payoffs. The people are more concerned with whether or not they are getting their own share of whatever favors the politicians are able to hand out. The ruling party has the power to take away necessities of life, such as a clean water system, if a particular village opposes them. Even the legal system of the country is corrupt, as shown by the legal troubles Odili's father experiences when he supports his son's opposition to the government.

In this book, the author uses the story of a dishonest shopkeeper to show how people will accept a certain amount of dishonesty and corruption, but if it becomes too obvious, they will not tolerate it. The shopkeeper steals a blind man's walking stick, and this makes the villagers so angry that they drive him out of business. Similarly, the corrupt government is eventually driven out of power, but it is replaced by a military regime that still does not have the true interests of the people at heart.

Individual Honor

Despite the overwhelming corruption of the country described by Achebe, individual characters in this book show a sense of honor. This is not a simple matter. Odili realizes he quite enjoys the luxury of Chief Nanga's home when he is a guest there, and he accepts the gift of a car from his political party. However, he refuses to accept money from Chief Nanga to withdraw from the election, even though Odili's friend Max urges him to take the money and then remain in the race. Odili also shows his sense of honor by speaking up courageously when he confronts Chief Nanga at the election rally. As a consequence, he is badly beaten for his boldness.

Odili's father has accepted bribes and has overextended himself financially by having 35 children, but in the end, he stands by his son despite the fact he will be charged



higher taxes. Edna is another character who shows individual honor by being loyal to Odili and trying to keep him from getting hurt. Max and Eunice are shown to be honorable people. Odili is pleased when his friend Max is declared a Hero of the Revolution after his death, because he realizes Max (while not perfect) was brave and had a true leader's vision. Max's fiancée, Eunice, bravely avenges him by killing the government official responsible for Max's death.

Male and Female Roles

In this country, it is acceptable for men to marry several wives, and this has a profound effect on the relationship between men and women. Chief Nanga's wife is loyal and supportive, but she is unable to stop her husband from planning to marry a younger, better educated second wife as a showpiece. The narrator, Odili, describes how his father marries far too many wives and has more children than he can support. The first wife in this household, called "Mama," is looked up to by all the others, and each wife is expected to be kind to the children of the other wives.

As in many countries, faithfulness is expected of women, but not of men. Odili and Chief Nanga indulge in some male bonding by boasting of their sexual conquests. When Chief Nanga sleeps with Elsie, Odili's friend and bed partner, he can't understand why Odili is upset, since both Odili and Elsie said the relationship was casual. Odili also sleeps with Jean, a married American woman, even though he doesn't particularly like her.

Men seem to set the rules. Edna's father arranges for her to be married to Chief Nanga, and she is afraid to defy him. Odili's father lays down the law to his wives about how they should treat the children in the family. Odili disregards Edna's pleas for him to leave her house (because she is afraid of a confrontation between Odili and her father) and he tries to put his arm around her even though she is engaged to another man.

However, there are examples of strong relationships between men and women. Odili's friend Max has a loving relationship with his fiancée, Eunice, who risks her own freedom to shoot the politician responsible for Max's death. Ultimately, Odili and Edna are able to be together and plan to be married, an outcome desired by both of them.

Control of Information

This book shows clearly how those in power can twist and distort the information given to the public. At the beginning of the book, the government decides not to anger its financial backers, and the politicians who disagree with this strategy are fired and discredited with lies. When Odili visits Chief Nanga in the capital city, there is a funny episode in which an official is convinced he is being poisoned by the very coffee the government has been advertising as a wonderful local product.

Toward the end of the book, Odili is unable to get any radio news coverage of his campaign. It is as if he doesn't exist. Then the "town crier," a man who tells the news in

the village, tells the people they have all decided to back Chief Nanga. Odili notes it is strange people have to be told what they themselves have supposedly decided.

Style

Point of View

This book is narrated in the first person by Odili, a young teacher who is an idealistic intellectual. The story is told both in dialogue and in exposition through Odili's eyes. By using Odili's point of view, Achebe is able to take the reader along on Odili's journey of learning the full extent of corruption in his country. He is also able to show Odili's blind spots and weaknesses, such as his pride, by describing Odili's perceptions. Like Odili, the reader is at first hopeful the country can improve with a change in leadership, but it becomes clear the will of the people is not strong enough to fight the greed of its leaders.

There are limitations to the first-person narration, primarily the limited amount of information given to the reader about the thoughts and feelings of other characters in the book. For example, we don't get a clear picture of Edna's perceptions and motivations, since we see only her actions and Odili's view of her. However, the point of view of this novel shows us the country as it is seen by the new generation of Africans, and it also allows Achebe to interest the reader in Odili's character on a very personal level. The book tells the story of a country that is changing and developing simultaneously as it tells the story of an individual who is changing and developing.

Setting

While Achebe's other books are set in his home country of Nigeria, this book is set in an unnamed African country. Because the narrator is a native of this country, he describes in a matter-of-fact way the customs such as polygamous marriage, warding off evil spirits, and the distinctions of rank and wealth. In this country, there is a great divide between the few who are powerful and wealthy, and the masses who live without adequate sanitation and sometimes without adequate food.

The time setting of the novel is the 1960s, about the time when the book itself was written. The story is set in the historical period just a few years after this fictional country wins its independence from white colonial rule. Shortly after the book was written, Achebe's home country of Nigeria experienced a military takeover like the one described in the book.

Language and Meaning

Achebe's style is witty and understated. For example, he describes the politician: "Nanga must have gone into politics soon afterward and then won a seat in Parliament. (It was easy in those days—before we knew its cash price.)" He uses the language that a young, educated man such as Odili would use. Achebe states profound truths simply, and uses metaphor sparingly. He sometimes connects the personal story of Odili and



the political story of the country by tying the themes together. For example, he shows how Odili uses deception to get what he wants with women while at the same time Odili is repulsed by the way politicians deceive the people.

Achebe writes some of the dialog in the pidgin dialect of Africa, which may be difficult for non-African readers to understand, but which adds to the vibrancy of the country in which this novel takes place. Better-educated characters use the pidgin dialect when they are trying to connect with less-educated countrymen.

Structure

This novel consists of 13 chapters of varying lengths. The main plot of the story follows Odili and his relationship with Chief Nanga, but there are times when the author gives background information to help the reader and to make some points. The author sometimes changes his focus from what is going on in Odili's life to talk about what is happening across the country.



Quotes

They were not only ignorant but cynical. Tell them that this man has used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you –as my father did—if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth. (Chapter 1)

For what is modesty but inverted pride? We all think we are first-class people. Modesty forbids us from saying so ourselves though, presumably, not from wanting to hear it from others. (Chapter 1)

I remember him saying for instance that the greatest delight of his entire visit to Britain was when, for the first time in his twenty-seven years, a white man—a taxi driver I think—carried his suitcase and said “Sir” to him. (Chapter 2)

...I have, since this incident, come up against another critic who committed a crime in my view because he transferred to an alien culture the same meanings and interpretation that his own people attach to certain gestures and facial expression. (Chapter 5)

So what, I said within myself. Your accusation may be true, but you’ve no right to make it. Leave it to us and don’t contaminate our cause by espousing it. (Chapter 5)

Chief Nanga was a born politician; he could get away with almost anything he said or did. And as long as men are swayed by their hearts and stomachs and not their heads the Chief Nangas of this world will continue to get away with anything. (Chapter 7)

...I must say I find it somewhat odd that a party calling itself the Common People’s Convention should be made up of only professional men and women... (Chapter 8)

I thought much afterwards about that proverb, about the man taking things away until the owner at last notices. In the mouth of our people there was no greater condemnation. It was not just a simple question of a man’s cup being full. A man’s cup might be full and none be the wiser. But here the owner knew, and the owner, I discovered, is the will of the whole people. (Chapter 9)

After seven years of lethargy any action seemed welcome and desirable; the country was ripe and impatient to shed in violent exercise the lazy folds of flabby skin and fat it had put on in the greedy years of indolence. (Chapter 10)

As a rule I don’t like suffering to no purpose. Suffering should be creative, should give birth to something good and lovely. (Chapter 10)

What I had to accomplish became more than another squabble for political office; it rose suddenly to the heights of symbolic action, a shining, monumental gesture untainted by hopes of success or reward. (Chapter 12)



It is a sad truth of our nature that man becomes too easily brutalized by circumstance.
(Chapter 12)

Then I realized that I had never really been close enough to my father to understand him. I had built up a private picture of him from unconnected scraps of evidence.
(Chapter 13)

The people themselves, as we have seen, had become even more cynical than their leaders and were apathetic into the bargain...The important thing then is to stay alive; if you do you will outlive your present annoyance. (Chapter 13)

The owner was the village, and the village had a mind; it could say no to sacrilege. But in the affairs of the nation there was no owner... (Chapter 13)

...in such a regime, I say, you died a good death if your life had inspired someone to come forward and shoot your murderer in the chest –without asking to be paid. (Chapter 13)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Odili shows both strengths and weaknesses in his character. What are his greatest strengths? What are his weaknesses?

Topic 2

Chief Nanga is described as “A Man of the People.” What does this mean? How does he represent the people in his country? What is his relationship with the people he represents?

Topic 3

How does Odili perceive Chief Nanga at different points during the book? What do they have in common? How are they different?

Topic 4

Are there any political events in the United States that are similar to the political events in the book? Do we have any leaders who are similar to Chief Nanga, in your opinion? Are there other countries that currently face some of the same difficulties shown in this book?

Topic 5

How is the culture in the country depicted in the book similar to and different from our own? What are some of the specific characteristics of the culture of this country?

Topic 6

How do Chief Nanga and his followers exert power over Odili when he tries to run against the Chief in the election? How do they control what is going on in the election?

Topic 7

Achebe describes the people of this country as both greedy and noble. What are the ways in which the people in general behave badly, and what are some examples of their strength and courage?



Topic 8

What is the meaning of the proverb about the man “taking enough that the owner notices”? Why does Achebe bring up this proverb several times in the book?

Topic 9

What do you think will happen to Odili after the story in the book is ended? Imagine what his life will be like in ten years. What will he be doing? What kind of person will he be?