Lesson Plan  Reading Behind the Mountains with an emphasis on proverbs

by Cynthia P. Dessen

Grade Level: 6 to 9th grade (with some adaptations)
Subject: Literature and Social Studies

Objectives:
* Create a deeper understanding of Behind the Mountains by Edwidge Danticat by examining the proverbs used
* Gain a greater understanding of the use and importance of proverbs by African and Caribbean peoples
* Introduce the idea of diaspora (of people and parts of their culture)
* Explore students’ personal connection to the themes of this novel

Resources:
* Copy of Behind the Mountains by Edwidge Danticat for each student
* Packet of photocopies of materials (enclosed with this lesson plan)
  Achebe, Chinua. Things Fall Apart chapter one
  Jablow, Alta. Yes and No: The Intimate Folklore of Africa (Dilemma tales, proverbs, stories of love and adult riddles) proverb chapter with deletions
* Map of Africa with culture groups
* Map of Caribbean
This volume includes two useful essays for background on teaching about African proverbs. “The Language of the Proverb in Akan” by L.A. Boadi pps 183-191. and “The Proverb in Modern Written Swahili Literature: An Aid to Proverb Education” by Carol M. Eastman pps 193-209.

Vocabulary:
Proverb--A short popular saying that expresses effectively some commonplace truth or useful thought.
Folktales--A tale of anonymous origin and forming part of the oral traditions of a people.
African tribal groups--Efik, Ga, Hausa, Vai, Kru, Yoruba, Jabo, Bura, Mende, Gio, Loma, Bassa, Fan
Procedure:
First class period
1. As a class, discuss proverbs. What proverbs do students know? (Ex. A stitch in time
saves nine. To kill two birds with one stone.) Are these sayings useful? How?
2. Divide into five small groups. Distribute a different set of proverbs from Yes and No to
each group. Ask each group to decide on two favorites and have every person in that
group be prepared to “teach” or explain those two proverbs.
3. Set up a carousel activity. Post the sets of proverbs around the room in five places and
divide the students to each new group now has one person from the five original groups.
Cycle through the sets of proverbs with students presenting “their” favorite African
proverb. It would be very useful to have a map of African culture groups so that various
peoples could be located on the map.
4. Introduce and assign reading: Chapter 8 from A Voice for all People. (optional
assignment: Write about an object that has a personal meaning for you, an object like
Wes’ brass casting, something that creates or explains your identity to yourself.)

Second class period
1. As an assessment, before discussion of Courlander, I would have students write an
outline of the folktale cited from The Cow-Tail Switch that ends with a proverb. (Note: If
time allows, a good creative writing assignment would be to have students try writing a
tale that ends with this proverb before reading the Courlander chapter.)
2. Discuss this chapter. Be sure to talk about Courlander’s assertion that “a lot of Haitian
stories that derive from Africa, for example, may have lost a particular element in
transmission down the generations. Maybe their mothers and fathers got the point.”
3. Present chapter one of Things Fall Apart by reading it aloud.
4. Talk about how Achebe’s characters use proverbs as part of their culture and the art of
Ibo conversation.
5. Assign first 50 pages of Danticat. Have students make a log of the proverbs used in the
book.

Third class period
1. Bring in dous or some other Haitian food to taste.
2. Teacher will tell or read “Bye-Bye” from Wolstein’s collection. This introduces the
topic of diaspora.
2. Give short presentation on diaspora, including food migrations. Give handout of
Plantation Proverbs from Barboza’s book. Discuss.
3. Give in-class reading time for next 50 pages of Danticat.

Fourth class period
1. Discuss Danticat. Give some background on history and politics of Haiti. Project the
novel’s ending. Do people/families grow apart or can they live together again? All stories
center around a problem or problems. What do characters fear? What makes them happy?
Fifth class period
1. Discuss Danticat and proverbs, esp title of book.
2. Depending on age level and time frame, a final project could be a group mural/ collage. From a table of art supplies try to depict what you would miss from this place if you had to leave it. Or write a description of what you would miss.

Extensions:
1. *Behind the Mountains* makes an interesting comparison and contrast with *Taste of Salt* (Temple, Frances. *Taste of Salt: A Story of Modern Haiti*. NY: Harper Collins, 1992.) In both books Haitian politics play a prominent role. Both books also use journals and make the point that we need to make a record of our life stories.
2. Use the internet to explore more on Haitian proverbs and African Ashante or Akan proverbs and gold weights.
PLANTATION PROVERBS

Slaves produced a large body of proverbs—gems of wit and wisdom that are as true today as they were in the nineteenth century.

Crow an’ corn can’t grow in de same fiel’.

You can hide de fire, but w’at you gwine do wid de smoke?

Ef your coat-tail catch a-fire, don’t wait till you kin see de blaze ’fo’ you put it out.

De price of your hat ain’t de measure of your brain.

Buyin’ on credit is robbin’ next year’s crop.

In God we trust, all others cash.

Dirt show de quickest on de cleanest cotton.

Blind horse knows when de trough is empty.

Ain’t no use askin’ the cow to pour you a glass of milk.

Last year’s hot spell cools off mighty fast.

Little hole in your pocket is worse than a big one at de knee.

Appetite don’t regulate de time of day.

Man who gits hurt working oughta show de scars.

One person can thread a needle better than two.
De point of de pin is de easiest end to find.

• Sharp ax bettern' big muscle.

• Little flakes make de deepest snow.

• Deep snow tell heap o' tales on de rabbit.

• De cowbell can't keep a secret.

• Jest countin' stumps don't clear the field.

• Wagon makes the loudest noise when it's goin' out empty.

• Talkin' 'bout fire doesn't boil the pot.

• Old Used-to-Do-It-This-Way don't help none today.

• Death don't see no difference 'tween the big house and the cabin.

• Can't break the plow point twice.

• Hand plow can't make furrows by itself.

• Dog don't get mad when you says he's a dog.

• Buzzard ain't circle in the air jest for fun.

• Can't sit on the bucket and draw water at the same time.

• If you want to see how much folks is goin' to miss you, just stick your finger in de pond den pull it out and look at the hole.

In 1954, Courlander left his work as a news analyst with the Voice of America when he became a press officer and speechwriter for the United Nations. He and Emma lived in New York City. Their son, Michael, was born in 1951 and their daughter, Susan, was born four years later. In the years immediately following World War II, the United Nations symbolized humanity’s hope for lasting peace. As a journalist who had traveled to many parts of the world, Courlander could now see how people tried to solve problems of war, hunger, and disease on an international scale as representatives of nations new and old met in the General Assembly. His book Shaping Our Times: What the United Nations Is and Does describes much of what he learned and observed.

The 1960s into the ’70s was a time of great productivity for Courlander in his own writing as well. He was becoming known more and more as an authoritative scholar and writer in the field of oral
Emma Meltzer, Courlander's second wife, with Michael and Susan (left), in Port-au-
Prince, 1958.
(Photograph: Harold
Courlander. Courtesy
Courlander Family)
literature and cultural studies. He wrote folktale collections, fiction and nonfiction, and he produced records and spoke as a radio commentator on current events. It was a time for him to bring to the world the wealth of stories he had been documenting and absorbing for so many years.

Courlander had lived in Haiti and Ethiopia, he had traveled to India and other parts of Asia, he had traced the roots of Africans in the Americas with visits to Ghana and Nigeria, and he had collected songs and stories in the South. Now he was ready to transform what he had learned from the oral tradition into the printed word. A collection of African folktales, *The Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories*, that he co-wrote with anthropologist George Herzog had already won a prestigious Newbery Honor in 1947. There followed *The King's Drum and Other African Stories, The Piece of Fire and
Other Haitian Tales, The Tiger’s Whisker and Other Tales from Asia and the Pacific, The Hat-Shaking Dance and Other Ashanti Tales from Ghana, and Olode the Hunter and Other Tales from Nigeria.

Courlander had always followed his own path, and through his investigations had gained insights into life and people. Now he was acting as a voice for all the people who had shared their stories, their songs, and their lives with him. During this period, Courlander could not always travel to the places where the stories came from, such as Indonesia, China, and Korea. He collected many of these stories from informants, people of different cultural backgrounds who were then living in the United States, as well as from translations of ancient texts and earlier anthropologists’ fieldwork.

Courlander felt a deep responsibility to the people whose stories he had collected and was now retelling. Sometimes he had to defend the style or content of the folktales to editors he worked with. In one collection, there was a Hottentot tale. “It was about how people die and don’t live again. That was the theme of it—how that came about. It was a kind of ‘how it began’ story, why after people die they don’t live again. An editor I was dealing with said, ‘A lot of people don’t believe that, they believe you do live again.’ And I had to be adamant about it and say, ‘This is the story!’ The editor didn’t think it was suitable for children. Well too bad, they have to learn other people don’t think the same way as they do—that’s what it’s all about.”

Courlander’s own family was from Central and Eastern Europe. He himself had grown up a second-generation American in the Midwest. Yet he felt impelled to record, write, and interpret what he had learned in Haiti, Ethiopia, Asia, and West Africa. As much as he was a writer, Courlander was also a great consummate listener. His ear for music, for language, for nuance and inflection, his curiosity about black American stories, dating back to his childhood in
Detroit, had taken him on a lifelong journey into world culture. “I always felt, this material is oral literature. Even before I ever heard the term, I felt it was literature. It was a product of a culture and it had to be properly represented in as simple and straightforward a way as possible without a lot of changes.”

Courlander knew that, unlike written literature, stories from the oral tradition had different versions, that storytellers often changed them as they were passed from one generation to the next and from one language to another. How did he find a way to choose from among these tales? How could he write them so that, to the reader, they would feel as true to their origins as possible? He once said, “I’ve always been sensitive to hearing, and to sort of taking it in. You can’t just sit down and knock off a story. If you have a feeling for the actuality of the people, it helps a lot. I’ve had stories told to me, where I didn’t quite follow the punchline. A lot of Haitian stories that derive from Africa, for example, may have lost a particular element in transmission down the generations. Maybe their fathers and mothers got the point. If I wasn’t sure about the meaning of a story, I generally pursued it till I got other sources. Then in some cases, I would combine what I knew when I retold them. The second source gave me what I was missing, I guess I have saved a few from oblivion. I’m glad of that. It’s been fun. It’s not been just for somebody else—I got a lot of enjoyment out of it, and out of meeting and working with the people themselves.”

Courlander could see the modern world coming to all the countries he visited. He knew that these oral traditions were being affected by many forces, that stories would be lost. He felt it was important to preserve and record as much of the rich narratives and expressions he was hearing. Ever thorough, each of his books and recordings is accompanied by extensive notes giving background on
the geographical regions, the sources of the stories, the songs and the singers. He told me during our interviews: “I was always looking for a whole picture—not just the music or stories by themselves. Folklore is just a fragment.” What was the whole picture? How did these patterns fall into place to create a sociocultural reality for one group of people? What did the songs and stories mean to the community that was transmitting them? These were the questions that concerned him.

In his experiences with publishers, Courlander often argued with editors who claimed that folktales belonged to the “young readers” category. In their cultural settings, the stories were a part of daily life and a way of educating young and old. “We think of folklore as children’s literature, which it isn’t, or wasn’t, originally. It was for everybody. In African cultures especially, stories are . . . for older people and younger people. Everybody listens in. If the young people want an explanation, they get it from the tellers.” In some cases he saw, storytelling sessions were informal, where listeners gather around a mother or grandmother. For special occasions, such as a wake, professional storytellers were called in to perform.
“With many African folktales as I know them, there was always a point to them. And they might end with a specifically worded proverb. Here is one that I used in *The Cow-Tail Switch*: This hunter left his family to go hunting. He didn’t come back. Once in a while a member of the family said, ‘I wonder where father is? I haven’t seen him.’ ‘Well you know he went hunting.’ And then no one would mention it anymore. A year would go by, and someone would say, ‘You know, father never came back.’

“There’s a baby, that’s born after the hunter had left. He grew normally to a certain point, and just when he began to speak, his first words were: ‘Where is my father?’ And everyone said: ‘Yes, yes, where is father?’ and his sons said, ‘Don’t you remember? Father went hunting. Don’t you think maybe we’d better go look for him?’ The sons of the father went in search—each of them had a special capability. One of them had the gift of knowing directions... They said, ‘Which way shall we go?’ and the one who had the gift of directions said, ‘I think we should go that way.’ Eventually they reached the place. They found the skeleton of their father. He had been killed by a leopard or something. He’d been lying there. And they said, ‘Oh, this is father. You can tell by some of the clothing items lying around. And that’s his spear.’

“They didn’t know what to do until one of them, who had the gift of putting flesh on bones, did something and put the flesh on the bones. Another one had the gift of putting the skin over the flesh. And still his body was lying there. Another one had the gift of speech and he gave it to the body. And the next one had the gift of movement which he put into the body. And finally the father was restored to life. He picked up his spear and they all went back home together. And of course there was a great celebration when the father turned up again—dancing and feasting and whatnot in the
village. The father was sitting on a chair, watching everything that was going on. And then at some point he said ‘I have this cow-tail switch. It’s made out of an animal tail.’ (The handles were often beautifully carved.) And he said, ‘I’m going to give this switch to that son of mine who did the most to bring me back from where I had been killed.’

“And the sons started a big argument and one said, ‘I found it, because I found the direction’ and another one said, ‘But I put flesh on his bones’ and another one said this and that. And after they had all made their arguments, the father turned around and gave the cow-tail switch to his little baby and said, ‘He was the one. He said, “Where is my father?” He started it all.’ And the proverb it ends with is: ‘A man is not dead until he is forgotten.’

“You see how the whole story is built to lead to this proverb. And there are an awful lot of stories of this kind that lead to proverbs or sayings. Maybe it’s not a profound proverb, maybe it’s just a saying. In West African tradition there are many of those. Often in the process of transmission the proverb has been lost, you’ve just got the narration. . . . Many cultures are like that, the tales, with or without proverbs, are intended as educational— instructive is a better word—and in that sense they were directed towards adults as reminders, and to children as learning things. That’s why the stories stayed alive, because they remained pertinent. That’s why people kept telling them. . . . But then a lot of stories are instructive in different ways, not in moral terms, but as a way for people to ask questions. How did certain things begin? That’s a natural question that is often thought-provoking. Where did we come from? Why are we here? So there’s a story that will explain how we got here—and why certain things exist in the tradition. That’s explained in the story too. The story either implies an answer or gives you a specific answer.”
A Voice for the People

Courlander paid close attention not only to the stories he heard, but to how they were told. But can one person ever completely “take on the voice” of another culture? Or even of another person? Was it right for him to write in the voice of a black American, a Haitian, a West African? For Courlander, this was not a purely abstract or philosophical question. His writing style and personal values were directly shaped by his experiences with people from different cultures, as he knew and understood them. Overall, his love of story and narrative drew him to learn about these different worlds and to feel the need to express their way of life. But the field of anthropology had also seriously influenced Courlander. He was never an academic scholar. He never taught at a college or university, yet he had received grants and fellowships for his research.

Courlander had studied and corresponded with the great anthropologists of his time—Melville Herskovits, Franz Boas, William Bascom. And, as usual, he always came to his own conclusions.

Courlander believed that human beings are shaped most of all by their culture, not their race. In Cuba in the 1930s and 1940s, he had seen in certain ceremonies how “white Cubans”—people of European ancestry—had danced and played music with the same movement, rhythmic coordination, and even vocal styles as Cubans who were directly descended from African forebears. How was it possible for these modes of expression to pass from one “race” to another? Courlander concluded that it was cultural experiences that shaped these expressions. Due to historical circumstances, people in Cuba from different racial and ethnic origins were interacting, and so, their ways of communicating began to influence one another as well.

Once he cited an example of Matthew Henson, an African American who had been part of an expedition to the Arctic. He stayed with the Eskimos and had a son with an Eskimo wife. When American
explorers met the son, they could easily see his physical difference from the other Eskimos. Yet his language, his way of moving and physical gestures, his attitudes and beliefs all identified him easily as a member of his mother’s family and cultural group. What made him who he was were his life experiences, from infancy, among the Eskimo people—not his skin color or body type.

Courlander asked, “How do you build a shelter? You build a shelter out of the materials that are available to you. If the Eskimos lived in Africa they would have been building straw houses.

“People ask questions. Human beings are curious. We want to know why lightning struck a certain object. We have our own explanations. Sometimes we can’t really explain why it hit that house and not this house. Why did the lightning strike? Different cultures have different answers. But I don’t find that Haitian or West African answers are anything more fantastic than what you find in the New Testament or the Old Testament, at all. It’s just what people have been able to answer based on their life experience. I became more interested in the similarities rather than the differences among human beings.”

The idea of the underlying unity of humanity was to remain a lifelong conviction, despite his acute awareness of social conflicts on the local, national, and global levels. In 1960, he brought these thoughts together in a pamphlet he wrote for the Anti-Defamation League—On Recognizing the Human Species. In the last chapter, he wrote: “All the peoples of the earth are members of a single biological species. Whether they live in great political states or in tribal semi-isolation, whether they are adherents to one of the great modern religions or of so-called ‘pagan’ beliefs, whether they specialize in making mechanical devices or in raising cattle, all people are representatives of Homo sapiens. No living example of an early inferior species of man has ever been found. . . . Societies develop or remain
undeveloped according to the dynamics of their needs, their wishes, their surroundings, and their dreams. All societies build their institutions and their way of life out of the common materials of the earth and their common human impulses. . . . Between one group of people and another, regardless of their particular solutions [to] the problems of living, it is impossible to distinguish varying degrees of human nature. Just below the surface of manners and customs lies our common identity.” Perhaps it was this sense of common humanity that, even unconsciously, also drew him to explore and write in cultural voices that were not his “own.”

In 1960, Courlander left his work with Folkways and the United Nations to return to journalism and broadcasting with the Washington office of the Voice of America. He moved with Emma and their children to Bethesda, Maryland, which became their hometown. The year 1960 also saw the publication of his masterwork on Haiti, *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People*. Courlander had been making trips to Haiti since the early 1930s. In *The Drum and the Hoe*, he put his years of work, learning, and love of Haitian culture into one comprehensive volume. The book was a way for Courlander to give voice to the richness and complexity of life in Haiti. As a scholarly resource, this work also established him as an authority in the field of cultural studies and made his name known to a wider audience.

Although Courlander worked in many fields—anthropology, folklore, ethnomusicology—he always saw himself, first and foremost, as a writer, a narrator, a storyteller. Writing fiction was his way to express and assimilate what he had come to understand and feel about the people and ways of life he had encountered. For Courlander, the ethnographic documentation and field studies were never enough. If he felt he had really gotten a picture, a feel for “the inner
culture” of a people, then characters and motifs would form in his own head and had to be expressed, not in a rigorous academic form, but in novels and fiction. “I’m ready to write when I’m through with the research, when the main study is over. There’s a period of pondering. Questions would come to my mind. Working on a novel is a way of organizing everything through the literary approach—no holds barred.”

In the early 1960s, Courlander began to be haunted by a character who was slowly beginning to take shape in his mind. What did it mean, he wondered to himself, for a first-generation African in America, brought over on a slave ship, to have to survive and adapt
to life on a plantation? What would happen to a slave’s sense of self, his sense of language, his sense of his own destiny, in undergoing these horrific challenges? As the character became clearer, Courlander began to write of a young boy from Dahomey named Hwesuhunu. He saw him, in his mind’s eye, working in the bush with his father and the other men of the village. He saw the brutal raid by the chief’s men and the enforced march to the stockade in Cotonou. As he saw all these things, he began to write, and slowly a novel emerged. He called it *The African*.

In Haiti, Courlander had seen the potency of the African gods, the *lwa*, ever-present in the life of the Haitian countryside. He remembered Legba, the Dahomean god of fate and change. Legba of the crossroads, who had to be acknowledged and whose blessings were invoked before any journey. In the South, he had seen the church services and heard the proverbs, listened to the songs played on the banjo and strummed and drummed at weddings, funerals, and social gatherings. The services were Christian, but in all of them, he had heard the inner voices of Africa. Behind much of Courlander’s thinking a theme began to resonate with great force and urgency: How would this young man find his sense of self and identity—cut off, as it must have happened, from his family, his village, his country, all that he knew and understood to be real, good, and true?

Courlander began to explore all these questions through the life of Hwesuhunu, who is renamed Wes Hunu by an old slave. In the novel, Wes eventually escapes from the plantation. Hiding out with his friend Julian among the Creek Indians in the Alabama woodlands, he thinks over all the things that have happened to him:

Wes lay that night upon a bed of skin and blankets, but he could not sleep... Was Wes Hunu, who now slept in the Indian house, the
same person as Hwesuhunu, the African? For the things he knew most closely seemed to belong to another place and another time. . . . It suddenly seemed ridiculous to cling to the past. For here in this land there was no such thing as Fon, only white men, black men, and brown men. . . . Lying silently in the night he summoned up an old village song and sang it inside his head. But did this prove that Yabo ever existed? It proved nothing more than did an Indian hunter’s imitation of the call of a groundhog. For to live was to communicate, as the drummer did to the dancers, as the Legba priest did to Legba, as the storyteller did to the people, as the dead did, on occasion, to the living. . . . Speech alone is not communication. For did not Julian and Vespey speak together without understanding? Nor could they ever, for they shared no common soul between them. . . . But what Wes remembered as the soul of the Fon, the thing he clung to that had given him the only certainty he had known, was it real or only a trick of the mind? And while he lay there and thought of these things and sought desperately for his identity, he felt an object like a sharp stone pressing against his chest. . . . It was not a stone, but the brass casting made on St. Lucia, which Kofi had given him before going out to be hanged. He felt its contours with his fingers. It was real. It seemed to bring Kofi alive, and all those others who had fought and died on the island. . . . It brought the slave stockade in Cotonou to life again, and his father, and Adanzan, and the village of Yabo, and the kingdom of Dahomey. This crude brass figure of a man, born smooth and now discolored, was the testimony and the link. All those things that were suddenly real again after having seemed to die and fade away, they had molded Hwesuhunu. And he understood gratefully that Hwesuhunu and Wes Hunu were one and the same, that he was here in the Tsoaha town only because Mawu, the parent of all vodouns, had thus written it down. In the writings of Mawu were the magic of creation and the fate of all men. In Mawu’s mind Hwesuhunu had been given his life, his character and his Fa. So it was. He slept.
Courlander had been familiar with contemporary black American literature since his college days. He knew and admired the work of Zora Neale Hurston (whom he met in Haiti), Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and others. Years before, after reading *Native Son* by Richard Wright, he had expressed in a letter to Herskovits his desire to one day write a novel of black life that would be as true to the black experience as Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* was to that of Oklahoma migrant workers. *The African* was the result of his efforts. It was a deep and thorough exploration of what he knew and understood of African-American history and experiences.

Alice Childress, the black American novelist and screenwriter, wrote to him after its publication: “Dear Harold and Emma—Glad to hear from you! I’m sure you’ve been busy adding to your works, and beautifully. An artist, Tom Feelings, was telling me about you and how your book *The African* is really told from a black point of view—that you’re the only white author who has captured all the dreams, strivings, etc. I was proud to tell him you are our friend. . . . Alice and Nat.”

*The African* was published in 1967. Later, in the 1970s, it became the center of a storm of controversy with the television serialization of the novel *Roots*, by Alex Haley. When Courlander first sat down to watch the television series, he was surprised by the many similarities he saw in the plots of *Roots* and *The African*. When he read the book, he realized there were many other similarities to passages and phrases from *The African*. Courlander decided to sue Haley for plagiarism. Because *Roots* had become so popular and well known, the case was covered in newspapers across the country. The trial took place in New York City in the fall of 1978.
Cover of the 1967 edition of The African, Courlander's novel of Hwesuhunu, a young Dahomean boy who is captured and sold into slavery in the American South. (Courtesy Courlander Estate)

The African
by Harold Courlander

An extraordinary novel of epic proportions exploring the transition from freedom to slavery—and focusing on the uprooted Africans trying to survive in alien surroundings.
After six weeks of arduous testimony, Haley and his lawyers approached Courlander and offered to settle the case. An article in the Washington Post reported that “Alex Haley acknowledges and regrets that various materials from The African by Harold Courlander found their way into his book Roots.” Although there was financial recompense, for Courlander the issue was much more one of standing up for the creative integrity of his work, and this, in a sense, had been recognized by Haley and the court. “It’s literary justice,” he told a Washington Post reporter. “Not justice for the whole world, but for something creative I worked on. Something creative is the most precious possession I have.”

Whatever the controversies about its use of sources and authenticity, there is no doubt that Roots has had a lasting impact on contemporary American culture. And even in this circuitous way, Courlander’s work—his years of exploration, writing, and research—played a role in changing our outlook by helping us to recognize the importance of cultural heritage and family history in shaping who we are as individuals and as members of the larger society.

Toward the end of the 1960s, Courlander felt it was time to pursue another large research project in oral literature. Although he had spent many years studying African cultures, he had always had an interest in Native Americans, especially those who lived in the West. Perhaps this went back to his early years, listening wide-eyed to his father’s tales of cowboys and Indians. He also had a sense that there were many stories that had not yet been recorded that could reveal much about Native American thought and culture. And so in the summer of 1968, his own sixtieth year, he and Emma, along with Michael and Susan, made their way out to the Southwest, for what would be his last great period of work in the field, among the Pueblo Indians, the Hopi people of Arizona.
"Bye-Bye"

About the Story: Michelle was a girl of about nineteen who worked as a seamstress. Sitting on a chair on Jeanne Philippe's porch, she spoke simply and quietly, with a constant twinkle in her eye. When the turtle in the story spoke "the one English word he knew," Michelle looked directly at me, said "Bye-Bye," and burst out laughing. "Bye-Bye!" "Bye-Bye!" the others joined in. There was general merriment. Not until later did I get to hear the end of the story, for everyone wanted at that moment to try out their English words on the American—the one from New York.

All the birds were flying from Haiti to New York. But Turtle could not go, for he had no wings.

Pigeon felt sorry for Turtle and said, "Turtle, I'll take you with me. This is what we'll do. I'll hold in my mouth one end of a piece of wood and you hold on to the other end. But you must not let go. No matter what happens, do not let go or you'll fall into the water."

Pigeon took one end of a piece of wood and Turtle the other end. Up into the air Pigeon flew and Turtle with him, across the land and toward the sea.
“BYE-BYE”

As they came near the ocean, Turtle and Pigeon saw on the shore a group of animals who had gathered together to wave good-bye to the birds who were leaving. They were waving steadily until they noticed Turtle and Pigeon. Turtle? They stopped waving and a great hubbub broke out.

“Look!” they cried to each other. “Turtle is going to New York. Even Turtle is going to New York!”

And Turtle was so pleased to hear everyone talking about him that he shouted out the one English word he knew:

“Bye-Bye!”

Oh-oh! Turtle had opened his mouth, and in opening his mouth to speak, he let go of the piece of wood and fell into the sea.

For that reason there are many Pigeons in New York, but Turtle is still in Haiti.
Counterweights, also known as gold-weights

Akan people, Ghana
made before 1960
brass or bronze, or copper alloy, cast in the lost wax (cire-perdue) method
Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, The Wichita State University

These miniature sculptures served as counterweights for weighing gold, from around 1400–1900 among the peoples of southern Ghana and the neighboring regions of the Ivory Coast. Then gold-dust currency was replaced by British colonial coinage. The oldest weights have geometric designs, others represent animals, birds, plants, people and their activities, and objects associated with the royal court and prestige. All these images tell Ashanti proverbs and represent a rich inventory of Ashanti thought and material culture.

Three antelopes
3¼" h., 1 1/4" h., 7/8" h.
91.4.194, 91.4.240, 91.4.216
The extremely long horns of these antelopes represent the saying: "Had I known," where a visual pun is made between the length of the horn and the idea that only in retrospect can one see the results of what one unwittingly started (McLeod 13).

Man playing an ivory side-blown trumpet
1 5/8" h.
91.4.224

Man with gun, sword and trophy skulls tied to his waist
2" h.
91.4.287

Man with staff
1 7/8" h.
91.4.231

Serpent striking at a bird
1 1/2" h.
91.4.311
This motif is associated with the saying "A man should not despair at getting anything, however difficult it may seem" (Corbin 151).

Six birds on a pole
2 1/8" h.
94.1.361
"Birds of a feather flock together," meaning in Ashanti "the bird's relation is the one he sits with."

Bird
1 1/2" h.
91.4.320
The bird looking backward is a popular subject for gold-weights. A proverb sometimes associated with it is "Regrets are in vain," but it is also sometimes used as a symbol of the all-seeing power of the king.

Bird
7/8" h.
91.4.207
The bird's body is twisted in the form of a "wise man's knot," a well-used Ashanti symbol. Also known as "clock bird."
indirectly (through social institutions, sanctions, and natural law) controlled by him. Through prayers, ceremonies, rituals, blessings, sacred places, objects, and personages, humanity actively engages the religious order of the universe.

Africans also believe that there is a mystical order of power that is closely linked to the religious order of the universe because it comes from the Supreme Being; it can be tapped into by spirits and by some human beings. The order shows itself in the ability of some Africans to predict events accurately, to perform miracles and wonders, to be telepathic, and to ward off evil. It can also be negatively used to bring misfortune and harm to people and property.

Africans believe in the reality of witches and sorcerers, and especially in their power to bring illness, infertility, suffering, failure, death, and general calamity. Their power comes from tapping into the mystical force of the universe and directing that energy toward evil deeds.

Though humanity is at the center of the African concept of the universe, the human being is not seen as the master of nature. The human being is simply nature’s friend and
I

On Ignorance and Knowledge

It is not only one mother who can cook a nice soup. (Ejik)

If you have never drunk somebody else's mother's soup, you think only your mother's soup is good. (Ga)

A man is like a pepper; till you have chewed it, you do not know how hot it is. (Hausa)

A man who has not seen the new moon before, calls the stars the moon. (Vai)

If there were no elephant in the bush, the bush-cow would be a great animal. (Kru)

The stone in the water knows nothing of the hill which lies parched in the sun. (Hausa)
II

On Prudence

One is not sent up to have the ladder then drawn away from under him. (Ga)
Pull the child out of the water before you punish it. (Vai)
One does not set fire to the roof and then go to bed. (Yoruba)
One does not throw a stick after the snake is gone. (Jabo)
Should a man roof his house, without first building the walls? (Esik)

III

On Knowing One's Place

Even if you sit on the bottom of the sea, you cannot be a fish. (Vai)
An egg cannot fight with a stone. (Bura)
You are not the alligator's brother, though you swim well by his side. (Mende)
If a crocodile deserts the water, he will find himself on a spear. (Bura)
There is no man clever enough to lick his own back. (Kru)

IV

On Endurance

An elephant does not grow in one day. (Gio)
Bit by bit the fly ate the dog's ear. (Ga)
If a man live long enough, he shall have eaten a whole elephant. (Vai)
If there is a continual going to the well, one day there will be a smashing of the pitcher. (Hausa)

V

On Wealth

The pipe of the poor does not sound. (Ga)
An empty rice bag will not stand up. (Loma)
Wealth is the man; if you have nothing, no one loves you. (Hausa)
Being poor makes it hard to have friends but not impossible. (Bura)
The frog says, "I have nothing, but I have my hop." (Vai)
VI

On Being Content With Oneself

An elephant never gets tired of carrying his tusks. (Vai)
I have a pot, why then should I search for another? (Kru)
One who cannot pick up an ant and wants to pick up an
elephant will someday see his folly. (Jabo)
Salt does not praise itself that it is sweet. (Ga)

VII

On Anger

Anger is a warmth which lights itself. (Kru)
One does not become so mad at his head that he wears
his hat on his buttocks. (Yoruba)
If you are never angry, then you are unborn. (Bassa)
A frown is not a slap. (Hausa)
Sweetness walks with bitterness. (Efik)

VIII

On Consequences

The ashes are the children of the fire. (Bura)
Today is the elder brother of tomorrow, and a heavy dew
is the elder brother of rain. (Fan)

IX

On Women

Regular work tires a woman, but totally wrecks a man.
(Fan)
If you want peace, give ear to your wives’ proposals.
(Fan)
The old bachelor does his own cooking. (Mande)
Who marries a beautiful woman marries torment.
(Mande)
A woman will find ninety-nine lies, but she will betray
herself with the hundredth. (Hausa)
A mother who has twins doesn’t lie on her side. (Mano)
Women take up their market baskets and also take up
gossip. (Efik)

I wouldn’t want this section.
First published in England in 1958, *THINGS FALL APART* is Chinua Achebe's first and most famous novel, a classic of modern African writing. It is the story of a “strong” man whose life is dominated by fear and anger, a powerful and moving narrative that critics have compared with classic Greek tragedy. Written with remarkable economy and subtle irony, it is uniquely and richly African and at the same time reveals Achebe’s keen awareness of the human qualities common to men of all times and all places.

*THINGS FALL APART* is no less successful as a social document, dramatizing traditional Ibo life in its first encounter with colonialism and Christianity at the turn of this century. Set in an Ibo village in what is now Biafra, the novel vividly re-creates pre-Christian tribal life and shows how the coming of the white man led to the breaking up of the old ways.

“Things Fall Apart takes its place with that small company of sensitive books that describe primitive society from the inside. In a few years there can be no more. Then these books will become a rich storehouse for the future, full of nostalgia, and (perhaps) a never-to-be-recaptured truth.”
—The New York Times
“Beyond Achebe’s portrayal of the old Ibo society or his portrayal of a contemporary society in the throes of transition, there is one theme which runs through everything he has written—human communication and the lack of it. He shows the impossibly complicated difficulties of one person speaking to another, attempting to make himself known to another, attempting to hear—really to hear—what another is saying. In his novels, we see man as a creature whose means of communication are both infinitely subtle and infinitely clumsy, a prey to invariable misunderstandings. Yet Achebe’s writing also conveys the feeling that we must attempt to communicate, however imperfectly, if we are not to succumb to despair or madness. The words which are spoken are rarely the words which are heard, but we must go on speaking.

“In Ibo villages, the men working on their farm plots in the midst of the rain forest often shout to one another—a reassurance, to make certain the other is still there, on the next cultivated patch, on the other side of the thick undergrowth. The writing of Chinua Achebe is like this. It seeks to send human voices through thickets of our separateness.”

—MARGARET LAURENCE,
*Long Drums and Cannons*
OKONKWO WAS WELL KNOWN THROUGHOUT the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights.

The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on his arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat.

That was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during this time Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan. He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their houses could hear him breathe. When he
walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father.

Unoka, for that was his father's name, had died ten years ago. In his day he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbors and made merry. He always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime. Unoka was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbor some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts.

He was tall but very thin and had a slight stoop. He wore a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing on his flute. He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing egwugwu to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. They would go to such hosts for as long as three or four markets, making music and feasting. Unoka loved the good fare and the good fellowship, and he loved this season of the year, when the rains had stopped and the sun rose every morning with dazzling beauty. And it was not too hot either, because the cold and dry harmattan wind was blowing down from the north. Some years the harmattan was very severe and a dense haze hung on the atmosphere. Old men and children would sit round log fires, warming their bodies. Unoka loved it all, and he loved the first kites that returned with the dry season, and the children who sang songs of welcome to them. He would remember his own childhood, how he had often wandered around looking for a kite sailing leisurely against the blue sky. As soon as he found one he would sing with his whole being, welcoming it back from its long, long journey, and asking it if it had brought home any lengths of cloth.

That was years ago, when he was young. Unoka, the grown-up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back. But Unoka was such a man that he always succeeded in borrowing more, and piling up his debts.

One day a neighbor called Okoye came in to see him. He was reclining on a mud bed in his hut playing on the flute. He immediately rose and shook hands with Okoye, who then unrolled the goatskin which he carried under his arm, and sat down. Unoka went into an inner room and soon returned with a small wooden disc containing a kola nut, some alligator pepper and a lump of white chalk.

"I have kola," he announced when he sat down, and passed the disc over to his guest.

"Thank you. He who brings kola brings life. But I think you ought to break it," replied Okoye, passing back the disc.

"No, it is for you, I think," and they argued like this for a few moments before Unoka accepted the
honor of breaking the kola. Okoye, meanwhile, took the lump of chalk, drew some lines on the floor, and then painted his big toe.

As he broke the kola, Unoka prayed to their ancestors for life and health, and for protection against their enemies. When they had eaten they talked about many things: about the heavy rains which were drowning the yams, about the next ancestral feast and about the impending war with the village of Mbaino. Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood. And so he changed the subject and talked about music, and his face beamed. He could hear in his mind's ear the blood-stirring and intricate rhythms of the *ekwe* and the *udu* and the *ogene*, and he could hear his own flute weaving in and out of them, decorating them with a colorful and plaintive tune. The total effect was gay and brisk, but if one picked out the flute as it went up and down and then broke up into short snatches, one saw that there was sorrow and grief there.

Okoye was also a musician. He played on the *ogene*. But he was not a failure like Unoka. He had a large barn full of yams and he had three wives. And now he was going to take the Idemili title, the third highest in the land. It was a very expensive ceremony and he was gathering all his resources together. That was in fact the reason why he had come to see Unoka. He cleared his throat and began:

"Thank you for the kola. You may have heard of the title I intend to take shortly."

Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten. Okoye was a great talker and he spoke for a long time, skirting round the subject and then hitting it finally. In short, he was asking Unoka to return the two hundred cowries he had borrowed from him more than two years before. As soon as Unoka understood what his friend was driving at, he burst out laughing. He laughed loud and long and his voice rang out clear as the *ogene*, and tears stood in his eyes. His visitor was amazed, and sat speechless. At the end, Unoka was able to give an answer between fresh outbursts of mirth.

"Look at that wall," he said, pointing at the far wall of his hut, which was rubbed with red earth so that it shone. "Look at those lines of chalk," and Okoye saw groups of short perpendicular lines drawn in chalk. There were five groups, and the smallest group had ten lines. Unoka had a sense of the dramatic and so he allowed a pause, in which he took a pinch of snuff and sneezed noisily, and then he continued: "Each group there represents a debt to someone, and each stroke is one hundred cowries. You see, I owe that man a thousand cowries. But he has not come to wake me up in the morning for it. I shall pay you, but not today. Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them. I shall pay my big debts first." And he took another pinch of snuff, as if that was paying the big debts first. Okoye rolled his goatskin and departed.

When Unoka died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him? Fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father. Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a
wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders. And that was how he came to look after the doomed lad who was sacrificed to the village of Umuofia by their neighbors to avoid war and bloodshed. The ill-fated lad was called Ikemefuna.

**Two**

OKONKWO HAD JUST BLOWN OUT THE palm-oil lamp and stretched himself on his bamboo bed when he heard the ogené of the town crier piercing the still night air. *Gome, gome, gome, gome,* boomed the hollow metal. Then the crier gave his message, and at the end of it beat his instrument again. And this was the message. Every man of Umuofia was asked to gather at the market place tomorrow morning. Okonkwo wondered what was amiss, for he knew certainly that something was amiss. He had discerned a clear overtone of tragedy in the crier’s voice, and even now he could still hear it as it grew dimmer and dimmer in the distance.

The night was very quiet. It was always quiet except on moonlight nights. Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear. It was called a string. And so on this particular night as the crier’s voice was gradually swallowed up in the distance, silence returned to the world, a vibrant silence made more intense by the universal trill of a million million forest insects.

On a moonlight night it would be different. The
Night again, and I am planning how to tell my story. Jeremie asked me today about living with Titid, about the shelter. She wrinkle her nose a little when she ask, like she think Lafanmi be maybe a nasty place.
I want her to know. I want her to love it like I did.

All we boys are Titid’s helpers—Marcel, Fortuné, Lally, all us smaller boys who live in the shelter. Sometime, I hear people say, “Why does Titid trouble with all these good-for-nothing boys?” In your nice way, Jeremie, you ask the same question. So I been thinking on the answer for you.
I think maybe without us Titid would fly away with his too much braininess. The way he grab the hair of a small boy, or lock his elbow around my neck sometime, I know we are not mostly trouble for Titid. We are family. Family is what Titid calls us, and is true. We run errands for Titid, yes. He gets food for us, sometimes even medicine if we sick. But it goes past that only. We are family and also team.

Titid begins to have many friends, all who want to talk to him. And he begins to have enemies, some who want to kill him. When he preaches in the church, the people’s love for him is like a big wave: it carries him up, up. But we are there when he comes down, when he is sweaty and weak and needs to be away from the crowd. We are small like Titid. We make a circle around him and we all run off.

People say, “Where’s Titid?” and “Some important man must talk with Titid!”

But Titid is gone. We boys have hidden him in a secret place, under the step . . . oh, somewhere, my Jeremie, you know . . .

Titid does not trust the telephone. He says the government has got a way to listen to his conversation, so it is better to forget the telephone altogether. We boys are his messenger, his telephone with feet. Titid says we must learn all the letters so that we will give the right message to the right man. “Or woman,” says Titid, laughing. Then I am glad Eulalie sometimes caught me and Lally, and taught us our letters.

Titid sees what I know, and he says, “Teacher Djo! Tell these boys what sound the letter D makes!”
“Duh!” says I.

“Duh! Duh!” yell the other boys, with faces like a political demonstration.

“And what name begins with this letter D, boys?” asks Titid, like he’s in the pulpit.

“Dessalines!” yells one boy. They all cheer.

“Duvalier!” yells another, in a different voice. They boo.

“Djo!” yells Lally, and all the boys commence their chant:

“D-jo! D-jo!” Like I run for office.

So, Jeremie, Titid assigns me a job. Is to help Pe Pierre, a friend of Titid’s, to teach the boys reading. Pe Pierre has a box full of books that he uses to teach the letters and the words. These books are called Taste Salt.

The name makes me remember a story my mama told us. You know this story, Jeremie? How if a person dies, and their body is stolen by a zombie master, the zombie master will make the body rise and work all day and all night as a slave. The zombie understands only his suffering. He has no power to break away. He can only work and work.

But there is one little trick that can save the zombie. Do you remember what it is, Jeremie? Did your mama tell you this?

If the zombie can get a taste of salt, he will understand. He will open his true eyes and see that he has been made a zombie. And he will turn against his master. He will obey him no longer. He will make himself free.

I am not so quick, Jeremie. Among us boys, Lally is the smart one. I use these books with Pe Pierre and not think anything about the title. Then one day I see why the books be called Taste Salt. Is because that is what being able to read and write is like. You understand things you didn’t before.

The man I work beside, Pe Pierre, is a Belgian priest, a blan. He has worked a long time with Misyon Alfa and knows about the big world. I am happy to work with him because he takes time to explain everything to me, to answer every question.

But sometimes I feel like Eulalie herself, pulling ears and twisting arms to make people come learn to read.

“Catch Fortuné, Djo,” says Pe Pierre. “Go, bring in Marcel, Djo. I see him peeking in the window making mischief.”

I understand now that Titid made me teacher not because I am smart but because I am strong. Most of the boys have a mind to clean windshields all day on the corner, or to beg from the foreign journalists. This is because Titid gave us each a box, with a key, to keep our money in. So, they say, they must earn money to put in the box. To have empty box with key is no good.

I say, “Put your notebook in the box! Put a pencil!”