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## Revisiting African Culture: An African Perspective on Cultural Identity

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### ABSTRACT

This project brings out the transformation of African cultural identity under the impact of colonialism. Achebe creates a comprehensive portrait of the native Igbo culture, revealing all of its traditions, complex social hierarchy, and subtle phenomena of religious beliefs, and at the same time opposes the existing stereotypes and deceptions spread by Western authors and film directors. By the prudent use of the African proverbs and idioms, Achebe contrives a true depiction of an African culture in his plot structure thus enhancing the reality of his writing. Practically, the story is deeply enlightened with the incisive conscience of Achebe to the colonial encounter and the resultant effects it had on the African societies. In many ways, the narrative is shaped by Achebe's awareness of the colonial encounter and its effects on African societies. It is a qualitative research based on content analysis method. To examine the transformation of identity resulting from the colonial influence, this study follows postcolonial concepts of Edward W. Said's 'Orientalism', Stuart Hall's 'Diaspora', and Homi K. Bhabha's 'Hybridity'. This paper exposes that the cultural identity of the Africans is a traditionally given tag, a representation, and an oriental construction.

### INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a landmark of African Literature and Post-Colonial Writing. The novel tells us the story of the Igbo people of Nigeria both before and after the colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. The novel unveils colonial encounters and their impact on African societies. Through the eyes of the protagonist, Okonkwo, the novel explores how the Igbo culture and identity are challenged and mitigated by the colonial influence. The novel also questions the representation and interpretation of African cultures and histories by Western scholars. *Things Fall Apart* is a literary response to the stereotypical Western representation of Eastern societies by uncovering an authentic portrayal of Indigenous Igbo culture using African proverbs and idioms. This paper reveals the stereotypes and misconceptions generated by the colonial discourse. When education became the mode of civilization, the colonizers created knowledge addressing the Africans as uncivilized and savage communities. From them, the entire world collected this representation that Africans, the lower race are not equal to the whites, not equal to the humans. They have been othered, considering the descendants of the Devil, degraded with legal permissions.

For two centuries, the Africans served the Europeans in the slave trade. Currently, the black communities living in America, Caribbean islands and Europe are generally thought to be the decedents of those African slaves originally brought from African lands. Nowadays, if you ask anyone in these areas about their origin, no one will claim themselves as Africans. It is because they do not want to go back and search out their origin. They introduce

themselves as Europeans, American, Jamaicans, and Caribbeans. However, what makes them still uncivilized is the Western camera and writings. Western eyes cannot see the depth of the African culture, and even if they can observe, it shows them as primitive, whereas African culture is rich in itself.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

*Things Fall Apart* is the first novel by Chinua Achebe, published in 1958. The novel is set in the 1890's during the early days of colonialism in Nigeria. The novel portrays the clash between Nigeria's white colonial government and the traditional culture of the Igbo community. In the 1950s, Chinua Achebe was one of the founders of a Nigerian Library movement that drew upon the traditional oral culture of its indigenous people. Achebe published his masterpiece *Things Fall Apart*, as a response to novels, such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, that treat Africa as a cultureless foil in Europe. Achebe wrote this novel to convey a fuller understanding of one African culture.

Daniel M. Mengara, in his study "Colonial Intrusion and Stages of Colonialism in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," provides an analytical and conceptual framework that illuminates five stages (exploration, expropriation, appropriation, exploitation, and justification) of colonialism in Africa (Mengara 1-23). He argues that these stages were necessary for colonialism to become both an effective tool for domination and a successful tool for domination (Mengara 1-23). According to Mengara's study the white missionaries and traders come to the Igbo land and learn about their people and culture;

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they also introduce their religion and trade goods to the Igbo people. The white colonizers take over the land, resources, and labour of the Igbo people. They impose their laws and administration on the Igbo society and interfere with their political and religious system.

Diana Akers Rhoads, in her study “Culture in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” argues that Achebe represents the cultural roots of the Igbos in order to provide self-confidence (Rhoads, 1993). She suggests that Achebe tested Igbo culture against the goals of modern liberal democracy and set out to show how the Igbo meet those standards (Rhoads, 1993). The paper argues that Achebe’s novel shows how Igbo society had achieved many of the goals of modern liberal democracy before the colonial intrusion. Rhoads’s study suggests that Achebe’s novel can help in understanding the psycho-historical process of colonialism.

A study titled “Cultural Hybridity in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” explores the concept of cultural Hybridity in the novel. It argues that Hybridity is a dynamic process which plays a fundamental role in decolonizing and resisting the colonial effects (Rouiha & Guezoun, 2016). The study explores how *Things Fall Apart* depicts the resistance and subversion of the Igbo people and culture by creating mixed forms of identity and expression, based on a third space that transcends the binary opposition between the colonizer and the colonized. The paper uses Bhabha’s concept of Hybridity which is also connected to the theoretical framework of this project.

Another study titled “The Fall of National Identity in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” explores the deterioration of national identity in the novel. It argues that such deterioration is brought about by the spiritual and tentative defeat inherent in the failure of the protagonist, Okonkwo, to face the colonial whites (Abu Jweid, 2016). While the impact of colonialism on cultural identity has been widely studied, there seems to be less focus on its impact on individual identity. There is a scope of exploration on how the characters in the novel negotiate their personal identities in the face of colonialism. Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* is a prominent work of postcolonial literature. Achebe’s narrative technique, the portrayal of the clash between cultures and the shifting identity of indigenous Igbo people elaborate on the pre-colonial and post-colonial stages in Umuofia in Nigeria. Through the character of Okonkwo, the story moves forward and ends with Okonkwo’s death. The novel clearly portrays how colonialism destroys a well-established society and its culture. The people of the society suffer from an identity crisis. The novel also portrays how religion is used to dominate the Igbo people in the first place. The acceptance of Christianity by Okonkwo’s own people forces him to attempt suicide and leads the entire society to its downfall. With a tragic ending, the novel shapes the reality of colonialism and its impact on the indigenous Igbo community.

### Research gap

After reviewing the literature in this field, the researchers find out that there is no published document on the fundamental factors for the African cultural transformation. The researchers took it a research gap and aimed to bring out the factors that can destabilize any stable culture and unsettle from its native origin.

### Research objectives

The objectives of this research are:

- To examine Achebe’s critique of the stereotypes and misconceptions of cultural discourse.
- To expose the hegemonic factors that caused the African cultural transformation.

### Theoretical framework

The postcolonial theory utilized in this paper is used to question the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe that introduces the Igbo society in Nigeria prior to and after the intrusion of the British colonialists. Through the lenses of Orientalism, developed by Edward W. Said, and Hybridity, developed by Homei K. Bhabha, the paper focuses on the novel by analyzing how culture of the Igbo people is represented in the novel and how the colonialism has affected the community. Orientalism enables the colonials to create and define the colonised as the other and thus exercise power and domination. Hybridity helps to examine the process through which the colonised resisted, negotiated, and changed their identity and culture as a reaction to the encounter with the colonial.

The analysis also explores the narrative strategies used by Achebe to undermine the stereotypes related to the Orientals and to show the diversity and variability of Igbo society.

The novel *Things Fall Apart* is divided into three parts which have twenty-five chapters. The first part is entitled *The World of Okonkwo* and it presents the protagonist to the readers. Okonkwo is a warrior in the Igbo village of Umuofia and this part also defines the traditions, rituals and the social stratification of the community. The character of Okonkwo lies in his want to overcome the perceived weakness of his father, and a need to reestablish the traditional values. As a result, it is this section that lays the groundwork on the valuing of the cultural richness as well as the complexities that surround the life of pre-colonial Igbo.

The invasion of the European missionaries marks the rise of the colonialists in the second part of the story. The clash of the native belief systems and the colonial ideology creates an internal conflict, conversions, and an ensuing loss of the Indigenous values. The Igbo society is experiencing a dramatic change as the District Commissioner ushers in the British colonial rule and thus shaking prevailing lifestyles.

Hybridity provides a theoretical basis through which the mechanisms of conversion and identity change under the

colonial rule can be further decomposed. Orientalism on the other hand, brings out the aspect of power and dominance of the European actors over the Igbo people. The third part of the novel deals with the tragedy and its consequences that had follow resistance. An unfortunate event, that is the murder of one of the messengers, triggers a bloody retaliation of the colonial government. The story has a grand finale as Igbo resistance is crushed and the consequences of cultural clash are considered. The name *Things Fall Apart* summarizes the destruction of the traditional framework and the radical changes that were triggered by the impact of colonialism. Both Orientalism and Hybridity are used to explain the metamorphoses of the characters' cultural values and identities, and to reevaluate Achebe's narrative technique as he attempts to represent the East and the West.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper is qualitative research. Its main purpose is to analyze the transformation of culture and identity due to colonial impact in the light of postcolonial theory. As we know, qualitative research focuses on an intensive study and interpretation of the text itself, it is going to cover analytical research as well. This study is an analytical research in the sense that its main purpose is to analyse the theme of cultural identity and colonialism in the novel *Things Fall Apart* in the light of the theory. The researcher takes the text *Things Fall Apart* as a secondary source and makes an elaborate analysis of the appropriate incidents of the text. The novel has been read at a stretch at first. Then the second reading of the text attempts to identify the formal elements and certain issues in the text dealing with the problem to be analyzed. The researcher classifies the data in the novel to address cultural identity and colonial impact. Also, data from different articles, research papers and from different online sources have been collected as secondary sources. The paper then has been critically analyzed following the research questions and objectives. The research process includes literature review, theoretical framework, discussion and a conclusion.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Chinua Achebe masterfully depicts the complexity and dynamism of the Igbo culture and identity in *Things Fall Apart* by using a rich narrative that delves into various aspects of Igbo life. Achebe creates a living picture of Igbo cultural practices through the emphasis on tradition, rituals and social structures. He tells us about the spiciness of Igbo life through his detailed descriptions of events such as the New Yam Festival, wrestling contests and the marriage ceremonies.

The strength of the Igbo social organizations is that despite the challenges or disruptions, the Igbo people still manage to regenerate and still preserve their social integrated nature thereby showcasing the intricacy of the social interactions among the people. Besides, Achebe depicts an established Igbo society. He shows the intricate relationships between people and their communities, thus

showing the importance of personal and communal honor. Achebe outlines the spiritual dimensions of Igbo identity and expresses their belief system and deep connection with ancestral spirits. Nwoye's choice to accept Christianity reflects the tension between old religious beliefs and the adoption of a new religion. It is Nwoye's conversion that signifies a hybrid cultural and identity formation. This research shows that Igbo identity is not fixed, but is constantly changing, based on external influences.

### Achebe's Personal and Historical Experiences as a Cultural Discourse

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe systematically interrogates the tenacious stereotypes and misconceptions embedded in the cultural discourses, thus challenging the western representation of the African society. Achebe depicts the Igbo society with an implied subtlety, placing their rich cultural practices, and a sophisticated socio-structural arrangement in the foreground. He is an active opposer of stereotypes that hold African cultures to be primitive and inferior.

Achebe's own personal and historical experiences as an African writer and an intellectual of the postcolonial era is reflected in the novel *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe was born in Nigeria in 1930 and witnessed the impact of British colonization on his native Igbo culture. Achebe's description of cultural events in the novel, such as New Yam Festivals, reflects his commitment to portraying Igbo tradition authentically. The portrayal of Okonkwo's dominance within the household reflects Achebe's observations of social dynamics influenced by traditional gender roles, a theme rooted in his (Achebe) cultural background. The novel captures Achebe's perspective on the internal interactions with the colonizers, reflecting the historical events that shaped his understanding of the impact of colonial forces on African societies. Achebe's personal and intellectual reflections on the postcolonial era are encapsulated in the novel. The novel represents the disruptive impact of colonization on African societies, leading to a profound disintegration of traditional structures. The novel also reflects Achebe's own grappling with the legacy of colonialism in shaping contemporary African identities. Achebe's use of Igbo proverbs and idioms adds linguistic richness to the narrative. This choice reflects his commitment to presenting African voices in their own linguistic context. The use of the Igbo language in the text serves as a literary resistance to linguistic colonization. In conclusion, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a nuanced reflection of his personal and historical experiences as an African writer and intellectual. The novel serves as a literary response to the complexities of cultural change, colonial encounters and the postcolonial identities of African societies, emphasizing Achebe's intimate understanding of his native culture and the broader impact of colonialism on the African continent.

### Colonial Impact on the Igbo Community

Chinua Achebe's book *Things Fall Apart* is like a special

guide to the past. It helps us understand how life was in a place called Igbo before strangers, or colonizers came. The colonizers brought changes that made things fall apart. This project will showcase how the Igbo people lived, their unique identity, and how everything changed when outsiders came. This novel shows how the Igbo culture, religion, family and social structure were affected by the intrusion of the white missionaries and their government. The novel can be divided into three parts that correspond to the stages of colonialism: pre-colonial, early colonial and late colonial. In the pre-colonial stage, the Igbo society was independent, complex, and diverse, with its own traditions, values and institutions. The early colonial stage was marked by the arrival of the missionaries, who introduced Christianity and challenged the Igbo beliefs and practices. The late colonial stage was characterized by the imposition of the British administration, law, and education, which undermined the Igbo authority and identity.

The novel portrays the colonial impact on this Igbo society through the perspective of Okonkwo, the protagonist, who struggles to maintain his status and dignity in the face of the changing times. Okonkwo represents the traditional values of masculinity, strength, and courage, which are contrasted with the new values of the colonizers, such as pacifism, compassion, and compromise. Okonkwo's resistance to the colonial influence leads to his downfall and eventual suicide, which symbolizes the collapse of the Igbo society and culture. Okonkwo's resistance and suicide are the result of his inability to the changing times and his fear of losing his honor and identity. He sees the colonizers as a threat to his way of life and his clan's authority. He tries to fight back against them, but he finds himself isolated and unsupported by his clansmen, who are either converted, intimidated, or bribed by the colonizers. Okonkwo feels betrayed, and frustrated by the lack of resistance and the loss of unity among his people. He realizes that he has no place in the society that is emerging. He chooses to end his life rather than surrender to the colonizers or face the consequences of his actions. It shows the extent of the damage and the hopelessness caused by the colonial intrusion. It also foreshadows the fate of many other Igbo people who will either die, assimilate, or resist the colonial rule. The novel suggests that the colonial impact on the Igbo society was not only negative but also complex and ambiguous. While the novel criticizes the colonial oppression and exploitation of Igbo people, it also acknowledges the flaws and contradictions of the pre-colonial Igbo society, such as the rigid social hierarchy, the harsh treatment of women and outcasts, and the intolerance of dissent. The novel also shows that some Igbo people benefited from the colonial contact, such as those who converted to Christianity, gained education, or acquired wealth and power.

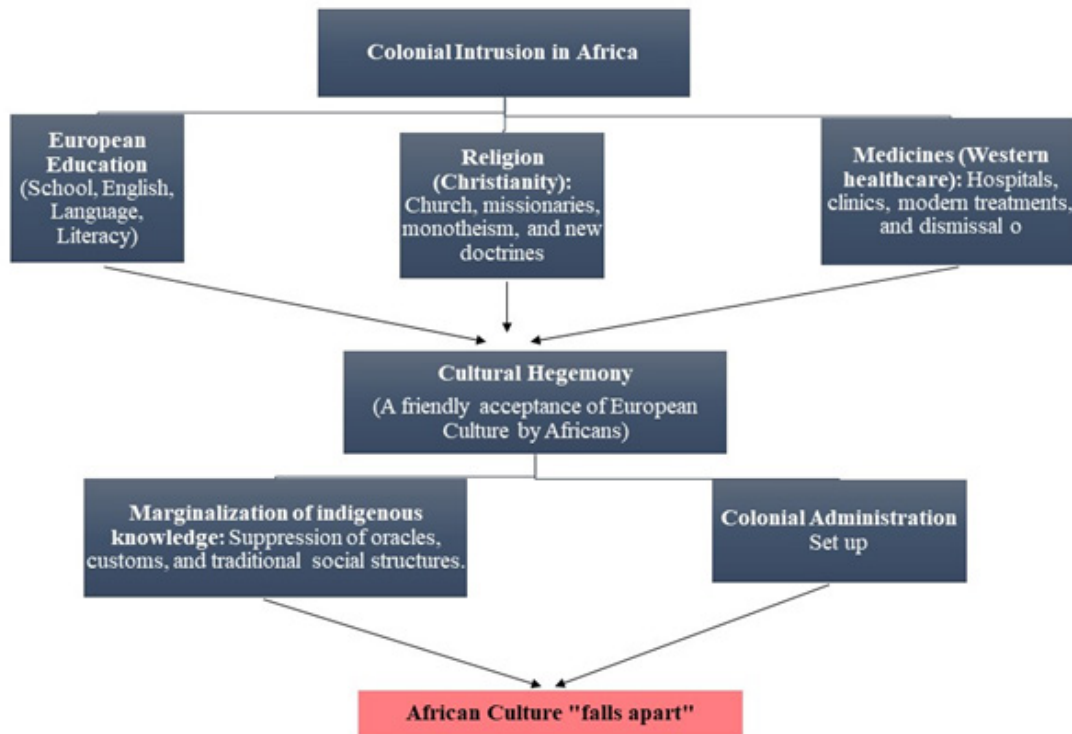
The colonizers introduce their culture, religion, and customs, attempting to supersede the Igbo tradition. The imposition of Christianity and European values

challenges the indigenous way of life, leading to a clash of cultures. Then there is economic disruption. Traditional trade practices are disrupted by a new economic order, altering the dynamics of commerce and resource management. Social fragmentation challenges the traditional values, leading to conflict between those who embrace and those who resist them. The colonizer enforces the English language as the language of administration and education. The overall impact of colonization erodes the core elements of Igbo identity. Aspects such as language, religion, and social practices are either replaced or significantly affected, leading to a profound transformation of the cultural fabric. The colonizers exploit the natural resources of the Igbo land for their economic benefit. The economic exploitation contributes to the deterioration of the local economy and exacerbates inequalities within the society. The novel showcases the lasting impact of colonialism on African society. The novel implies that the colonial encounter was not a simple clash of civilizations, but a process of negotiation and transformation.

### Findings

The Africans, for long, have been considered an uncivilized race by the Europeans. The Europeans entered Africa with the motto of civilization, developing three key European factors: Education, Religion, and Medicine. They found the Nigers have a big gap in these matters.

Africans did not have that European education, and so they remained ignorant of science, finance, arts, cosmology etc. Their religion is very cultural and pagan in type. The religious community itself faced some issues regarding the nature of worship. If any twin children are born, they're considered a curse for the family. The children are left in the dark jungle to feed the animals and this heinous act is considered as a worshipping act of to their goddess and they consider that these new born children are meal for the goddess. On the other hand, they consider the massive attack of grasshoppers is the anger of their goddess. Based on religious perception, Okonkwo slaughters a child. All these religious activities contrast to the Christianity introduced by the European colonizers. It had been introduced as a religion of love and mercy of Jesus Christ who protects all from sinful self-destructive activities. The third and the most convincing factor was European Medicine which was more powerful and less time-consuming than the African natural or herbal medicine. The Igbo community used to receive medicine from a physician who was also a religious person. He used to convince people that the failure of the medicine is the punishment for any sin or curse in the family. And the villagers also used keep a Heartfelt loyalty to the physician. Gradually the natives got realized that they got the alternative of their native physician in case of his failure. Very soon, the Africans accepted the European medicine to get rid of life taking diseases. Within a few decades, European Medicine,



**Figure 1:** Findings (Prepared by the Authors)

religion and education got the supreme support in the heart of the Africans. And that resulted in the collapse of African native culture and so their cultural identity.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* explores the intricate relationship between cultural identity and colonial impact. The novel explores the clash and fusion of cultures. Achebe's novel unveils the richness of pre-colonial Igbo culture, the vibrancy of traditions, social structures, and belief systems. However, the arrival of colonial forces disrupts this intricate tapestry, leading to a profound transformation that results in the disintegration of traditional values and practices. Achebe's portrayal of Igbo culture provides a counter-narrative to prevailing Western stereotypes. This challenges the notion that African cultures are primitive or inferior, paving the way for a more accurate and respectful representation in literature. By incorporating Igbo proverbs and idioms into the narrative, Achebe demonstrates the richness of African languages. This challenges the dominance of colonial language. Achebe provides a voice to the colonized, offering perspectives often marginalized or silenced in colonial literature. The indigenous voice becomes a significant contribution to the broader discourse on postcolonial identity. *Things Fall Apart* not only serves as a captivating tale but also holds significant implications and contributions for the broader study of African and postcolonial literature. The novel reflects Achebe's own personal and historical experience of colonialism in shaping contemporary African society.

It becomes a key text in understanding the complexities of resistance and adaptation in the face of external dominance. *Things Fall Apart* transcends its narrative boundaries to become a profound commentary on the complexities of cultural identity and colonial impact.

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