

**CULTURE AND CHANGE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF IGBO CULTURAL ALIENATION IN  
CHINUA ACHEBE'S „THINGS FALL APART“**

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**ABSTRACT:** Achebe considers Igbo culture as an open phenomenon that is liable to change. However, the scope of this change and the most active agent therein are still vague. This paper analytically determines the circumstances that underscore change in Igbo culture as implied in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" as well as the scope of this change. The research finds that the external agent play prominent role in Igbo cultural alienation but the internal agent is potentially more active. The study however fashions an epistemic axiological avenues that can foster sustainable Igbo culture, and enhance Igbo cultural authenticity. It then concludes that the sustenance of Igbo culture lies in the amendment of obnoxious inhuman practices as well as in the sustenance of Igbo language.

**KEY WORDS:** Culture; Change; Agent; Practice; Critical Analysis

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## **1. Introduction**

Based on their high democratic republicanism, Igbo nation has remained an open society. This makes Igbo culture to exist in an unchained circle of changing taboos, laws, customs, ethos and traditions (Nwigwe & Emedolu, 2004:65). Thus, cultural diffusion among the Igbos has been a complex turbulent affair that is difficult to control. Igbo culture however stems from their worldview made possible by their unique environment. This worldview is a conglomeration of meaningful answers articulated by Igbo Progenitors in their quest for meaning in the hostile environment.

From these pristine answers came theories, beliefs and practices, which the ancestors of the present Igbos passed from generation to generation to obviate environmental predicaments that threaten Igbo existence and survival.

From this discourse, culture for the Igbos can thus be understood as a unified picture of the cosmos, explained by a system of concepts that order the natural and social rhythms and the place of the Igbos in the world (Kalu, 1983:38). This culture is notably permeated by traditional religion that almost every reality has metaphysical imports, connotations and explications. Most importantly, culture in Igbo context gives coherence to the perception of the world and plays a central role in holding Igbo life together. It is a phenomenon that totally reflects in Igbo social, ethical, intellectual, scientific, artistic, technological expressions and processes, (Oyenuga & Olukaode 2009:94) and forms an integral system that embodies explicative and regulatory character, and performs adaptive and integrative roles (Michael 2008:96).

This functional way of life, which for ages held the Igbos together, is today being eroded, and the people that bear it are being alienated. The outstanding cradle of this estrangement is however traceable to pre-colonial epoch in the internal circle of Igbo culture. As reflected by Chinua Achebe in his "Things Fall Apart", aspects of Igbo cultural practices like spilling of innocent blood, rejection of twins, etc created some indispositions in some natives which eventual fanned the flame of cultural alienation. This condition was at the long run deepened by colonial cultural hegemony, (Iroegbu, 2004:5) which in multi facet ways brought an enduring change in Igbo culture. Certainly, this shattering blow made Obierika to moan that the colonialists have put a knife on the things that held Igbos together and they have fallen apart (Achebe, 1958:127). Thus, with the introduction of western life; language, religion and education as conventional ways of life and survival in Nigeria, Igbos have continuously estranged themselves from the culture that gives them authenticity. Moreover, despite the few advantages still, Igbos are gradually derailing from their cultural values and customs, as well as their unique autochthonous tract of civilization. Today, in Igbo society a tremendous increasing acculturation is gradually making core Igbo cultural contents extinct. This has created spates of pandemonium and perennial crisis of being, identity and personhood not just in the Igbo communities but also in the intrinsic personal equilibrium of the Igbo individual. This is so because Igbo culture embodies the ties

among the members of Igbo community, and it constitutes the interiority of the being of the individuals in the community, as well as the internal equilibrium of Igbo personhood which derives from stable and communally appreciated cultural values (Odimegwu,2004: 63).

To unveil the plethora of constant alienation pervading Igbo culture and to propose some panaceas, this research is spread into segments. The first segment is a general introduction meant to enhance awareness of the present state of the culture of the Igbos. The second segment unveils the foundation of the present alienation of Igbo culture. This was found in the early existential attitude adopted by Igbo Progenitors, enshrined in their proverbs and handed verbally from generation to generation. This attitude is fanned by Igbo inadequate sense of justice and cultural insensitivity towards certain human plights as well as the invasion of western cultural hegemony.

Meanwhile, the third segment dwells on the efficient cause of Igbo cultural alienation. Applying Aristotle's process of change in this context, efficient cause comprises the agents. These agents are philosophically located in the internal and external forum. The fourth segment points at the scope of Igbo cultural alienation, showing instances of permanent cultural substances despite the cultural change. The fifth segment however dwells on the current state of Igbo culture in the modern world. Here, it is discovered that Igbo culture in the modern world is constantly losing its attributes as a result of cultural alienation. This alienation is conspicuous in the general crisis of identity and personhood, evident among most Igbos in the urban centers and diaspora, who have ceased to be cornerstones of Igbo cultural traditions. The sixth segment then proposes overhauling and amendment of Igbo obnoxious cultural practices, and reclining to Igbo language as means of communication, education and research.

## **2. Foundation of Change in Igbo Culture**

Igbos often say that *mpe mpe ndu ka mpe mpe onwu* (pieces of life is better than pieces of death). This popular saying depicts the value Igbo people attach to life. As a result, the Igbo abhor any institution, tradition or practice that does not enhance human comfortable existence. The presence of many of such customs has propelled the Igbos to seek alternative patterns of life, relying firmly on their cosmological understanding that *Ikenga adiro ire, awaa ya nku* (if ancestral image is not powerful, it will be used as

firewood). Thus, man in Igbo context is viewed as a good that is (*mma di*) (Edeh, 2007:144), a good whose existence ought to be enhanced by culture. Based on this, every action is taken to improve life and any aspect of culture that fails to support human life wholly is simply jettisoned.

One obvious understanding of the Igbos also is that “*anoro ofu ebe ekiri mmanwu*”, implying that one need to explore other alternatives. As such, it is in their nature to embrace viable alternatives. “This is why there is hardly any part of the world you do not see an Igbo man” (Ogugua 2003:3). In fact, Igbos are pragmatic people that generally rely on positive results despite cultural stipulations. This has also formed the basis for the pervading cultural alienation and new ways of life evident in Igbo nation. Achebe asserts that Igbo cultural insensitivity to human suffering also lure the victims into another way of life. In fact, cultural cruelties often meted to the unlucky victims furthered Igbo cultural alienation. Take for instance, the parents of Ikemefuna who were deprived of their son, as well as the lowly woman whose sets of twin were constantly thrown into the evil forest. Such individuals as Achebe narrated in his “Things Fall Apart” were among the first to embrace western way of life as seen in Christianity. On this note, Wright also writes that;

The Igbo sense of justice is arbitrary and inadequate. The conflicts between the modern and traditional, individual and community are highlighted in Obierika's conflict of loyalties: personal/tribal, human/ religious, particularly when he fathers twins but then has to leave them in the evil forest, comforting Okonkwo then having to destroy his house. The question of loyalties, and irreconcilable differences between public and private needs, are made more painful because one person is frequently asked to do both conflicting things. This inner, personal conflict grew into an external, community conflict (Wright, 2017).

With all these, cultural cohesion was destroyed among the native Igbo leading to cultural vulnerability (Emenyonu, 1991:87). However, the eagerness to overcome pain, misery and set back inflicted by this culture, leads to an alternative that paves way for serious identity crisis.

Apart from these, contributory in Igbo cultural estrangement was the invasion of western cultural values or civilization, which was imperially imposed on the natives. The Igbo as reflected in “Things Fall Apart” has no king or central leader but only a highly efficient communal democratic government. In order to foster the exploitative colonial interest, this valuable traditional Igbo republicanism was replaced with a central government, which in the view of the natives is abominable. With this came upsurge of upstarts in the community as colonial kings and chiefs whose duty was to uphold colonial regime at the expense of their own people (Achebe, 1998:60-61). This was the beginning of warrant chiefs and latter *Igwe* or *Eze* (king) among the Igbos. In fact, the colonialists’ calculated their intentions to the unsuspecting natives. Prior to their operations in Igbo land, Lord Macaulay before the British parliament in 1835 proposes;

I have travelled across the length and breadth of Africa, and I have not seen one who is a beggar...such wealth I have seen in this country, such high moral values, people of such caliber, that I do not think we would ever conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage and therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient educational system, her culture, for if the Africans think that all that is foreign and English is good and Greater than their own, they will lose their self esteem, their native culture, and they will become what we want them, a truly dominated nation (Macaulay, 2017).

From here, the resolve to conquer Igbo natives was holistically launched from many fronts. The introduction of English as official language and the repudiation of Igbo language became an avenue to ridicule Igbo culture and to render it passively dormant. This plot yielded results because language is the vehicle that transports cultural traditions and customs. As such, the death of any language spells the death of its culture. Years after this attack, the present Igbos are mostly the only Nigerians who cannot speak fluently their dialect. Coupled with this alienation, the colonialists brought in western education, which was tailored to change Igbo psyche and pattern of thought. With curriculum of this education packaged from western culture and

geared towards repudiating Igbo culture as weak, barbaric and evil, there came another shattering blow on Igbo ways of life.

Worst still, the estranged Igbos even made satire of their people who could not imbibe or afford this western pattern of education. To alienate the Igbo mind further away from her heritage, most European scholars in their writings painted an ugly picture of Igbo culture as immoral and in need of colonial salvation. Although, Igbo scholars like Chinua Achebe responds to this falsehood in his “Things Fall Apart” the damage has been done. Consequently, the post-colonial Igbo even began to conclude that nothing is worth having in their culture. Hence, in conjunction with the colonial masters and missionaries, they destroyed some of these cultural heritages.

The Igbo natives as a compassionate and friendly society welcomed these Christian missionaries. Yet, they were oblivious of the fact that their guests intend to rule their lands and replace their culture and religion. However, as intended, the missionaries gradually replaced the traditional Igbo religion filled with active hierarchical beings with Christianity, which revolves around love and unconditional forgiveness. The unconditional forgiveness was a welcome relief to several people from the culture bound in servitude because of their sin against the culture of the land. Consequently, people are encouraged to forget the Igbo cultural way of life and to cling to the new religion in which they were baptized. However, it is also evident that Christianity alienated Igbos from their culture not by physical force but by rather responding clearly to some needs so deeply felt by the Igbos, but has not been clearly formulated in their culture” (Carol, Achebe, 1980:53). Thus, these needs such as human freedom, philosophic logical explanation of realities, etc. became baits that lure Igbos away from their culture. Again, victims’ of cultural injustices like the slaves, the social outcasts and the oppressed were already looking forward to an alternative culture.

### **3. The place of Agency in Igbo cultural alienation**

A critical study of Igbo cultural change reveals the reality of Agents as change catalysts. These Agents are in fact replete in the internal and external dimensions of Igbo culture. Though many scholars blame more the external agency in the change that pervades Igbo culture, the internal agents who are Igbo natives are potently more active. Of course, no culture crumbles from without but from within. In other words, no society

falls on its own for there must be prior internal condition hatched by internal agents, which makes the culture vulnerable to external pressure. Supporting this fact, Alimi indicates that this cultural scenario is present both in pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial Igbo society (Alimi, 012:121).

Although, change is one of the basic facts of human experience, the internal agent first made it significant in Igbo culture. They were the first to challenge the status quo. This internal significant role is what Taiwo calls 'a crack in the wall, which ushers in lizards.' (Taiwo, 2008:1) For such internal role opens, the door for the external Agents who cashes into the existing cultural rift and opportunistically operate successfully. Of course, cracks must occur in every culture because culture is replete with growth and counter effects that engender something new. Based on instances in Achebe's "Things Fall Apart", the character of Ogbuefi Ezeudu who was skeptical, and passively opposed the death of Ikemefuna based on Umuofia tradition is a central example of the role of internal agents in cultural alienation.

Ogbuefi Ezeudu was the oldest man in Okonkwo's quarter of Umuofia. Despite his advanced age, which in Igbo culture makes him a cultural model and connotes cultural conservatism, conformity and resistance to change, he was against the cultural spate of blood spill contained in Umuofia tradition. He even counseled Okonkwo to refrain from taking part in such cultural activities as pertains to spilling of innocent blood. The character of Okonkwo's friend Obierika also showed similar dissent even as it concerns the authority and decision of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves regarding spilling of human blood. He refrained from taking part in executing such harmful traditions. The internal cultural contradictions were such that even the decisions of the Oracles were highly questioned, though not publicly. It makes sense that at the point of colonial contact, there were already armies of natives who harbor deep reservations concerning certain aspects of Igbo culture.

Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, got the shock of his life when he discovered Ikemefuna has been killed. His heart snapped. Though too young to challenge the culture, his attachment and love for Umuofia custom and culture was slaughtered along with Ikemefuna. It was therefore not surprising that Nwoye opted for the Whiteman's religion, the position of his father notwithstanding. There was no logical reason for him to pay allegiance to a culture and religion, which slaughtered his innocent friend to please the oracle.

It is therefore discernible that the figures aforementioned and some others were of the view that such harsh cultural tenets whether it bothers on the decisions of the Oracle should be defied and expunged from Umuofia tradition. Therefore, these internal divisive vacuums made it easier for the external Agents to deal a shattering blow to Igbo culture. It then stands that “Things Fall Apart” as Achebe conceived did not start with the advent of colonialism, Christianity and western education. For before these, things have started falling apart from the grass root among the Igbos. This situation is evident in the indispositions and dislikes of some Igbos towards some of their harsh cultural aspects. These indispositions and dislikes weakened Igbo culture and made it vulnerable to external attack.

#### **4. Scope of Igbo cultural transformation**

The present transformation in Igbo culture has a limit. For amidst this change are some permanent cultural substances. Thus, every change is characterized by some permanent realities, which remain despite the change. This is why the ancient Philosopher Heraclitus avers that things change and take on many different forms, but they contain something, which remains constant throughout the flux of change. This permanent substance is also, what Hegel explains as the thesis that continues to manifest in the tripartite movement of the absolute history. Permanence in cultural change is indeed part of the basis of unity in diversity as well as the relation between the one and many. These permanent cultural substances are still reclined to by the Igbos in difficult times.

In Christianity for instance, is a situation where most Igbos professes Christian faith, and still goes back to their traditional way of life to get answers and solutions to their questions and problems, respectively. Some of the cultural practices, conceptions and material aspects have also been absorbed, preserved and practiced in Christianity. Such synthesis of Christianity and Igbo traditional culture cum religion is open in some measure in African indigenous churches (AIC) (Berger, 2002:10-11). Oguejiofor, ( 2001: 45) however adds that even the “healing prayer ministries” as seen today in mainline churches in Nigeria including the Catholic Church, are backed by a conception dictated in Igbo traditional religion and culture. Generally, therefore, Christianity in Igbo land

is laden with syncretism and many Igbos as ‘new wine in old wine bottle’ views some Christian practices.

Despite their western education, many Igbos on most occasions still resort to traditional/cultural way of existence and hardly count much on the modern western scientific means. Take marriage for example, the traditional marriage or wine carrying (*Igba Nkwu*) has until date held sway. This has resulted in two weddings among the Igbo- the traditional and the church wedding. A dead church member is buried in a Christian way by the church, and thereafter, traditional burial rites follow. Currently therefore, most Igbos can act like westerners elsewhere but still go home, and in the best indigenous tradition live their lives; avoiding traditional taboos and revering local traditional customs and norms which are ridiculous in western context. These actions are taken so as not to offend the sensibilities of either the culture or the church, thereby resulting in dual personality among the people.

Based on these realities in Igbo nation, Berger asserts that in cultural diffusion, two cultures can interpenetrate and cultural pluralism may occur yet such diffusion may have significant outlook, but is often ephemeral (Berger, 2008: 5). This is so because extrinsic ways of life does not totally engrave intrinsically in the very being of the traditional inhabitants. It was in line with this reality that British warrant chief system failed in Igbo land showing that Igbos can assimilate English language, but could never strip off their black skins, root out their black souls, or totally change their Igbo nature and root (Knor, 2008:90).

Thus, the western way of life among the Igbos is for the moment considered a learnt one; a newly adopted code of conduct, that is, an “addition” rather than a “replacement” of what has been learnt about life and living from the indigenous Igbo culture. (Hin- Huag 2002:52). It then stands that Igbo culture possesses a sulfuric odor of race and inheritance, a complex air of mutability and immutability. This is so because of the concept of being which subsists in every culture, and the fact that Igbo culture like others possesses “a state of being and a process of becoming, a position as well as a motion; a condition of permanence and a phenomenon of flux. (Odimegwu, 2008:24). Huntington explains this condition further stating that in a cultural change, “while maintaining elements of continuity, the prevailing culture in a society may only derail significantly from what it was one or two generations previously”(Huntington,

1991:311). It therefore means that cultural change is a gradual moderation but not a total replacement, and the demise of a culture can only happen with the total demise of the people that bear the culture.

### **5. State of Igbo Culture in the Modern World**

When two cultures interact, the more organized culture often dominates, affecting most of the traditions in the other and making its people to derail from their indigenous way of life. Igbo culture in the modern world is undergoing alienation and is gradually losing some attributes. Cultural diffusion has affected the Igbo nation so much, and the result has been uninterrupted crisis of identity and personhood. The worst hit in this context are Igbos in urban centers and diaspora who are not the cornerstones of Igbo traditions. Edeh submits that, this is so because these people are the exposed class that does not embody much volumes of Igbo traditional culture like the natives in the hinterlands, and their enlightenment cum constant association has deeply led them to compromise much of the traditional way of life they acquired (Edeh, 2007: 56). Consequently, these Igbos have an existence merely different from that obtainable in Igbo hinterlands.

The present change in Igbo culture is a modernization process, which is always complex and disordered. However, Igbo society is at present lacking functional cultural institutions capable of managing the stress created by this change. Due to this lack, modernization process has generated cultural crisis, which affects the Igbo individual and his community. Lending credence to the results of this cultural modernization process, Odimegwu argues that:

the result has been the production of the *evolue* who is neither African nor European but a schizophrenic personhood. This crisis-personhood arises from the fact that the culture by which the African defined and realized his self has been so ridiculed and bastardized that he no longer finds in it the stable and ideal foundation of an integral personhood. It also arises from his inability to identify himself effectively in, from and with the strange and bastardizing culture whose elements are at variance

and even in conflict with the fundamental constituents of his autochthonous culture (Odimegwu, 2008:61).

It therefore stands that Igbo cultural alienation is weakening the values that tie them together as homogenous people, as well as the social coherence between the individual and the society. It is as well weakening the internal equilibrium of the individuals, which stems from his cultural belief that is now in crisis.

### **6. Axiological avenues to sustainable Igbo culture**

Igbo cultural alienation may seem irredeemable but not all hope is lost. The sustenance of this culture has to begin with the amendment of obnoxious inhuman practices. These practices such as the ones meted to widows, orphans, women, the weak, the poor, etc ought to be overhauled. For when there is pain, it is in the nature of a victim to look for an alternative culture that soothes. Igbos capture this reality when they say that *ejighi anya oma eje uka ekpere* (those who rush to healing churches do so because of problems). Within this ambience, all facets and factors of Igbo cultural alienation should be discouraged. This will enable the decolonization of the Igbo mind and enhance their appreciation of what and who they really are.

Igbo culture now seems to lack functional means of expression and makes people captives. This is worse as Igbos have jettisoned her traditional republicanism and lacked legitimate leaders whom the aggrieved can run to. This condition is pathetic as the current Igbo leadership has been politicized giving rise to nonchalant leaders, who according to Achebe are mushroom kings constituting gradual Igbo cultural bankruptcy by being “traders in their stalls by day and monarchs at night; city dwellers five days a week and traditional village rulers on Saturdays and Sundays”. (Achebe, 1998: 61). Within this ambience, Igbo children are to be nurtured in Igbo culture. It should be made emphatic by parents within this space that the aim is for them to pass same to their generation.

Besides, the sustenance of Igbo language is of paramount importance, for language is the vehicle that carries culture from generation to generation. Thus, a collapse of indigenous language spells a collapse of indigenous culture. This is based on the rationale that “language provides valuable insight into the custom, beliefs, art, way of life, value, attitudes and capabilities of a people”. (Obiudo, 2011:491). It expresses what

a people stand for, reminds them what they are known for, and encourages them to live up to such expectations. Noticeable, part of the obvious sign of deterioration in Igbo culture and its authority is the repression of Igbo voices by colonial and postcolonial powers. From thence, Igbo language which is the vehicle that drives Igbo culture gave way to English language and to a hybridized pidgin/broken English resulting to the gradually collapse of Igbo cultural tenets. This proves then that the most profound and effective way to change a particular culture and take control of people, is to change their language or control their speech, for language reflects and sustains cultural information and realities (Gikanki, 1987: 35).

Above all, Igbo scholars and stakeholders must view it as their onerous task to promote Igbo language through their writings and programmes. This will go a long way in boosting the already alienating Igbo nation. In line with this, head of schools within the Igbo territory should promote Igbo as a language of instruction, and a medium of scientific and technological research. Within this ambience, Igbo language scholars are to produce also Igbo terminologies and vocabularies that will cover all areas of human life such as law, education, philosophy, engineering, etc. This should be coupled with making a local law within the southeastern states of Nigeria to promote and encourage Igbo language and culture by reflecting them in public announcements, advertisements and media programmes.

### **7. Conclusion**

In the socio-economic sphere of things, cultural alienation has its advantages. At least, it exposes one to new ideas that may lead to development. Yet, it leaves a people wandering without a base or identity thereby creating a psychological confusion that mars development in such people's existence. Hence, the necessary trend is for every new idea to be harmonized with one's cultural orientation. Such harmony creates some tranquility in the interiority of the individual's being and becomes a catalyst behind one's determination to succeed.

Based on the discourse so far, it stands that cultural alienation among Igbo people has as its catalyst the internal agents; comprising of the displeased indigenous natives. The cultural aversion and indisposition of these internal agents stem from experienced cultural injustices and mistreatments. Such unacceptable conditions go against the basic human existential craving to feel at home in the universe. Thus, internal agency

is potentially more active in cultural alienation of a people than external agency. Largely therefore, internal aversion towards unfavourable cultural elements create rooms for the advent and thrive of the external agents. Despite these, cultural alienation among the Igbos can be reduced when cultural elements are just, and taken as fervent aid to human existence. Since language embodies and drives culture, this should be coupled with the revamping, use and sustenance of Igbo language in national communication, education and research.

Because culture informs our aspirations, thoughts and actions, its importance is enormous. As such, Igbo society is as good as dead without autochthonous culture. Here lies the significance of Okonkwo's death at the end of Achebe's Igbo cultural tale in "Things Fall Apart". Okonkwo the Igbo legend committed suicide out of regret that Igbo culture is dying and so Igbo identity, personhood and being. He leaves a lesson for the present Igbos to rise to the challenge of the changing state of Igbo culture and evolve a means of safeguarding positive values of the people. It therefore stands that cultural alienation as pertains to the Igbos should be controlled. This control must start from the internal dimension of the Igbo nation. For things can only fall apart first from the activities of the people within.

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