

From Proverbs to Print: Epistemic Violence and Oral Culture in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

A key postcolonial work, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, critiques the cultural upheavals brought about by colonialism and explains the epistemological importance of oral traditions in Igbo society. The Igbo maintained their identity, government, and morals through storytelling, proverbs, and group rituals. Oral knowledge systems were marginalized by the colonial incursion, which was characterized by Christianity, Western education, and written legal systems. This resulted in a significant disruption of culture and knowledge. Incorporating Igbo oral modes into the novelistic structure, Achebe's book defies this erasure and upholds Indigenous voices. Despite continuous threats from globalization and cultural hegemony, this study emphasizes the timeless value of oral traditions and promotes their preservation.

Keywords: colonial disruption, epistemic violence, Igbo culture, oral tradition, Indigenous knowledge, proverbs, storytelling, postcolonial literature, cultural memory, Western education

Hypothesis

According to the study's hypothesis, *Things Fall Apart* serves as a cultural archive and literary artefact that affirms the epistemic worth of Igbo oral traditions, which is routinely weakened by colonial forces.

Research Gap

Fewer postcolonial studies have explicitly addressed the epistemological conflict between orality and literacy and its implications for Indigenous knowledge systems, although many have looked at *Things Fall Apart*'s themes of cultural clash and identity.

Statement of the Study

This essay explores how colonial rule eroded oral traditions in *Things Fall Apart* and makes the case that Achebe's book is an act of narrative resistance that upholds and validates Indigenous epistemologies.

Significance of the Problem

It is crucial to examine literary attempts to preserve Indigenous languages and oral traditions around the world, as globalization continues to endanger these knowledge systems. The cultural stakes associated with colonized societies' transition from oral to written traditions are better understood thanks to this paper.

Literature Review

Achebe's work has been widely discussed in postcolonial discourse. Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy* provides foundational insight into the epistemological shifts induced by textual culture. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* contextualizes language as a site of resistance. Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa* offers a framework for understanding the social function of oral narratives. More recent scholars like Chimurenga (2022) and Barber (2007) expand these discussions by exploring how literature

can function as a counter-archive. This paper builds on these perspectives to examine Achebe's intervention as both literary and epistemological.

Introduction: Orality as Cultural Epistemology

The oral traditions of the Igbo people of Nigeria have been the backbone of their political, social, and cultural life for centuries. Their collective consciousness was shaped by memory rather than manuscript. Proverbs, folktales, and songs were the means by which elders passed down history, incorporating moral standards and governing ideas into collective narrative. The spoken word was essential to the creation and sharing of knowledge in such a society, not a secondary component. The clash between this oral world and a colonial paradigm that values the written word is dramatised in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. The book is a literary intervention that laments the disappearance of Indigenous epistemologies while reaffirming their ongoing significance, not just a historical narrative of colonial incursion.

The reader is placed in a society by Achebe where orality controls all facets of existence. For instance, proverbs serve as teaching and diplomatic tools rather than as decorative language. The saying "A child who washes his hands can eat with kings" (Achebe 8) distils cultural knowledge into a moral precept. Folktales also communicate nuanced social values. Ekwefi's story of the tortoise and the birds, which offers amusement as well as moral insight, is about justice, greed, and deceit. Thus, oral traditions function as living texts that change with each recounting while staying anchored in social memory and cultural ethics.

Displacement of Oral Governance and Justice

Orality is ingrained in Igbo jurisprudence, just like its storytelling. The collective memory of elders, who serve as precedent keepers, is used to administer justice rather than codified legislation. By using historical analogies and moral reasoning woven into collective narratives, disputes are resolved through dialogic engagement. Elders have social authority because of their knowledge and memory. Legal norms are dynamic and subject to change based on historical awareness and collective negotiation.

However, these oral legal systems are rendered invalid by colonial administration. The British reject Igbo justice as informal and illogical and impose a written legal system. Achebe portrays this disruption as an epistemological violence rather than just an administrative change. Elderly knowledge is replaced by foreign bureaucrats whose power comes from written directives rather than personal experience. The Igbo legal tradition becomes outdated when voice is substituted with documents. The breakdown of this oral-based order is highlighted in the novel's climax by Okonkwo's defiance of colonial authority and eventual suicide. His passing represents not only individual hopelessness but also cultural destruction—the eradication of an orally based worldview (Achebe 147).

Colonial Modernity and Epistemic Subjugation

Colonialism started with ideology, language, and pedagogy rather than violence. Igbo cosmology, which was passed down through myth and ceremony, was replaced by Christianity brought by missionaries through the Bible. By portraying Indigenous wisdom as superstitious, schools propagated the idea that European knowledge systems were superior. Through the character of Nwoye, who is drawn to Christianity for its textual authority as well as its spiritual promise, Achebe deftly illustrates this transition. In contrast to the fluidity of oral tradition, the permanence of the written word provides Nwoye with a new, albeit alienating, framework of understanding (Achebe 104).

Converting to Christianity reflects a deeper epistemological shift than just a change in religion. Once valued, oral knowledge has become outdated. This is further supported by the colonial educational system, which undermines oral communication while elevating print literacy. Youngsters are indoctrinated to accept textbook-based Western epistemologies and to reject the stories of their forefathers. Younger generations become estranged from their cultural heritage as a result of this epistemic displacement. This change, according to Achebe, is essential to the larger colonial strategy, which aims to subjugate a people by destroying the frameworks that they use to define themselves (Ngũgĩ 16).

Narrative as Resistance and Cultural Preservation

Achebe's book serves two purposes: it both condemns colonial violence and implements a method of cultural preservation. Achebe restores a space for Indigenous expression by incorporating Igbo idioms, oral traditions, and proverbs into the English novel. By using this tactic, the novel becomes a storehouse of lost customs. By showcasing the philosophical depth and aesthetic appeal of oral discourse, the story challenges the dominance of the written word (Barber 45).

Furthermore, the participatory aspect of orality is highlighted in Achebe's narrative. Oral traditions necessitate interaction, in contrast to written texts. Meaning is negotiated rather than fixed, and listeners take on the roles of interpreters and co-creators. Oral traditions are both resilient and vulnerable because of their dynamic nature; they are adaptable but susceptible to epistemic marginalisation. This tension is acknowledged by Achebe, particularly in the scene where Okonkwo's life is reduced to a line in the District Commissioner's book at the end. The violence of textual reductionism is embodied in the act of enshrining a complex life into a sterile colonial narrative (Achebe 148).

The Philosophical Crisis of Epistemic Erasure

The decline of oral traditions represents a philosophical crisis in addition to cultural loss. Oral epistemologies place a strong emphasis on community, diversity, and flexibility. Written traditions, on the other hand, frequently enforce fixity, authority, and linearity. Devaluing orality by colonial regimes changes more than just communication; it changes how people think. There is a fundamental disruption in the community's methods of remembering, interpreting, and interacting with the outside world (Ong 42).

Achebe depicts this disruption in a way that is both allegorical and historical. The fate of numerous oral societies that were exposed to epistemic colonisation is reflected in Umuofia's transformation. A significant change in perspective is indicated by the imposition of monotheism over polytheistic traditions, the substitution of scripture for ritual, and the shift from dialogic governance to bureaucratic law. This is the breakdown of a philosophy as well as the collapse of a community.

The stakes are still high in the current global environment. Indigenous languages and the epistemologies they convey are rapidly disappearing, according to UNESCO. Every lost language obliterates a distinct perspective on the world. As a result, Achebe's writing has cultural significance in addition to literary merit. It forces us to reconsider written knowledge's hegemony and to re-establish reverence for the oral traditions that support innumerable communities around the globe.

Conclusion

Things Fall Apart is proof of the depth and vulnerability of oral traditions. Achebe depicts the disastrous effects of colonial epistemology on Indigenous knowledge systems via the prism of Igbo society. By turning his book into an act of resistance, he makes sure that the voices of the past are not dismissed or forgotten.

The story argues that orality is a unique, dynamic, and profoundly human mode of knowing rather than being less than literacy.

In order to protect epistemic diversity, oral traditions must be preserved. It is morally necessary to protect orality in a world where textual authority is homogenising society more and more. In addition to reading, Achebe encourages us to listen in order to understand the wisdom that is present in voice, memory, and collective storytelling. The difficulty lies in imagining a future in which various knowledge systems coexist in dignity and communication, rather than in going back to a precolonial past.

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