

## The Text, History and the Igbo World

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### Abstract

Through the text, we are able to understand our world. Many literary texts such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *No Longer at Ease* and even Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*, are like windows into the Igbo World. Most cultures have tried to make sense of their world through mythology. This is same for the Igbo. When it is said that the Igbo are republican and democratic in nature, how can we know that? When it is said that the Igbo have no kings, what does that mean? Are we able to understand the Igbo world through their texts? This is not to play down on the so-called scientific researches about the Igbo: it was proven that the selected texts helped us to fully gain insight into the Igbo world. This was the objective of this paper. It was purely a qualitative research; however, there were objective deductions and inductions in order to establish any concepts as they genuinely are. The theoretical frameworks that aided the critical analysis of the works were New Historicism, Structuralism and Formalism. New Historicism was used in analysing the bulk of the data, and in some cases the structuralist or formalist method was used to isolate units of knowledge, which were furthermore historicized in order to enable proper understanding of the Igbo world. The methodologies used were qualitative data analysis, collection of information from local informants and analysing the pieces of information against available data in texts. There were three hypotheses and finally a conclusion.

**Keywords:** Democratic Nature, Mythology, Igbo Cosmology, Cultures, Units of Knowledge

### Introduction

Who are the Igbo? There are different schools of thought about the Igbo origin. Some schools of thought locate Igbo origin in ancient Israel; others locate it somewhere "between Bida and Kotonkarifi, while others maintain that the Igbo have been in the location where they are for ages past. The hypothesis that the Igbo have been where they are for ages past is also supported by Afigbo (1981: p. 5), who thinks that the idea is identifiable in "the extent to which they have altered their physical environment". But altering the environment cannot be enough proof that the Igbo did not migrate from somewhere to the present place they are located. Furthermore, Afigbo (1981: 11-12) himself posits that according to Adams and Ward there are both linguistic and cultural relationship between the Igbo and Hebrews of the ancient Israel, and this claim was long before Basden made similar claims (Afigbo 1981: 6). However Afigbo posits that "the revolution in African studies since the 1950s has providentially freed us from the shackles of the Hamitic hypothesis..." (1981: 3). This, however, sounds like an Afrocentric ambition to free us from anything associated with European researches about Africa, even when the researches are very valid, which Afigbo himself acknowledges in the linguistic and cultural similarities between the Igbo and the Jews as posited by Adams and Ward and even Basden. Most recent researches in ancient Hebrew has corroborated the researches of Adams and Ward and also Basden; for verbs as *natan* and *nata* in Igbo and ancient Hebrew mean the same as well as sentence structures as *an aba* (ancient Hebrew): I come and *anam abia* (Igbo): I am coming, mean virtually the same. Besides, what has baffled scholars is why the sentence structures of the kwa-language group are not entirely similar with the sentence structure of Igbo as ancient Hebrew sentence structure seems to be in relation to Igbo. The similarity of certain

words among the so-called kwa language groups could have resulted from many years of association, which is very normal among languages, on the one hand; on the other hand, for there to still be similarities in meaning of some words and sentence structures in ancient Hebrew and Igbo is an indication that Igbo language underwent changes as a result of the Igbo having emigrated hundreds of thousands of years from their original homeland and then intermingled with other ethnicities where they settled greatly impacted on the language. Furthermore, one cannot simply dismiss the cultural practices of the Igbo, which were handed down from generation and which are largely dissimilar with the members of the so-called kwa-language language groups but similar with the Hebrew Levitical Codes. In fact, what is incontrovertible is that the European researchers who were commenting on their findings about the Igbo and Jews in terms of their Hebraic affinity were not trying to praise the Igbo nor were they seeking any filial bond, which would have been highly unlikely for Europeans known for their racism at the time some of these researches were carried out. Therefore, Afigbo accusing them of making sweeping generalizations without at the same time acknowledging their positive contributions to Igbo scholarship was itself a disservice.

In recent time, the Rabbinical court in Israel pronounced Igbos as Israelites and they specifically pointed out the reasons behind the pronouncement which was not unconnected to the verifiable researches of some of the European 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century researchers and the letters written by some Rabbis to the Igbos in the 19<sup>th</sup> century addressing them as brothers. Interestingly enough, Afigbo (1981: p.7) posits that only exhaustive archaeological work in Igbo land can establish or overthrow the view that the ancestors of the Igbo, probably, came down from Niger-Benue confluence and settled at the Nsukka-Okigwe cuesta. Archaeological works are enabled by DNA testing. Fortunately, some Igbos have tested their DNAs and the results point to the Middle East (Ilona, 2019: p. 27).

Indeed, cultural practices as Ichu Aja, Ilo Muo, Igbu Aja, Ifio Egbo, Ibe Ugwu, Ije Omugwo, Ima Mmonwu and Iru Mgbe (Ilona 2019: p. 60-84) are some of the practices that are similar to Hebrew cultural practices, but many of the groups that belong to the so-called Kwa-language groups do not have them. In other words, if Igbo originated from the Niger-Benue confluence and belong to the Kwa-language group as speculated by Afigbo, those cultures should have also had such practices as the Igbos, but that is not the case.

Some of these religious and cultural practices are lived in some of the literary texts and thus they help us experience fully some of the things we have taken for granted. There is no denying the fact that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* have helped in no small way in understanding pre-colonial Igbo life, just as Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities* helps us to appreciate the fact that the Igbo world view or cosmology is properly organized. In it we see that the ontological essence of the Igbo is a cyclical nature of being in which, as the author puts it, "that which came before is a corollary to that which follows it" (Obioma, 2018: 22): In other words, reincarnation is a given in the Igbo worldview.

This study will, therefore, trace, in order to analyse, the discursive formations of Igbo life and worldview in selected texts. Sometimes when it is said that the Igbo are republicans or that the Igbo have no kings or that the corpse of a daughter is never trapped in a foreign land, etc., most people may be confused about what these mean. However, in some of the texts under study, it is observable what it looks like when it is said that the Igbo are republican in nature; we are able also to understand what it means when it is said that the Igbo do not have kings or that the Igbo are individualistic, and not only that, but we are also able to understand the concept of God to the Igbo, the idea of law, religion, marriage, democracy and so on.

The purpose of the study is to interrogate the Igbo world in order to allow for deeper understanding of the ideas of religion, priesthood, Chi, God, family, hard-work, philosophy and democracy.

The method of the study is investigative and interpretive. Some of these concepts will be investigated properly and analysed by integrating ideas that are outside the mainstream so as to broaden the knowledge of the cosmology, origin, culture and religion of the Igbo.

### **Literature Review**

New Historicism is the most germane theory that adequately speaks to the idea of the text, history and society. It “is a school of literary theory, which emerged in 1980s and became popular in 1990s. Stephan Greenblatt, a professor at the University of California, first used the term “new historicism” in his introduction to *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (1982) (Jie-Xiu 2014: p. 259-263). Marxism, from the perspective of texts mirroring society, whose historical development is determined by production, and Post-structuralism from the perspective of textual discursive formations, all inspired what came to be known as New Historicism. In other words, while Marxism contributes to New Historicism from the text being socially produced, Post-structuralism in demonstrating the discursiveness of textual formations allows for the text to be socially productive.

Essentially New Historicism seeks not only to comprehend the text from the context of history, but it also seeks to understand cultural history through literary texts, a kind of historicity of texts and textuality of history (Greenblatt 2005: p. 16). The historicity of texts “suggests the historical specificity, the social and material embedding, of all modes of writing—not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them” (Greenblatt & Gunn, 2007, p. 209). In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (2008), for example, history is relived textually so that the past becomes very tangible and comprehensible; for usually, “people have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question—traces whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social process of preservation and effacement. (Greenblatt and Gunn 2007: p. 331). Texts such as Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *No Longer at Ease* and *An Orchestra of Minorities*, therefore, provide that access.

As Okafor (1992: p.13) states:

The concept of the world, physical and metaphysical, held by a people have vital influence on their attitude to and evaluation of life. It is still a valid psychological doctrine that our actions are precipitated by our mental attitude. So do our cosmological and metaphysical ideas determine the basic notions underlying our cultural, religious and social activities.

Therefore, in the Igbo world, the earth and the spirit world coexist in the universe even though in different dimensions, so that there is a frequent intermingling between the two worlds (Okafor 1992: p. 19).

The Igbo believe that as human beings, we live in the physical world, which is the earth. As spirits, which we become when we die, we exist *Benmuo* or in the spirit world. As Okafor (1992: p. 19) puts it, “in the world of spirits, Chukwu ranks the highest. Chukwu is the great first cause”. There is a distinction between the great *Chi* and the personal *Chi*. As Okafor (1992: p. 9-20) further states:

*Chi* is God's manifestation in all created things. It is held by the Igbo that *Chi* is the divine force directly involved with the affairs of men. Everyone has his own *Chi*. It is the personal *Chi* who arranges the life of every individual. Whenever she thinks it good to take a man away, that man dies. *Chi* fixes the destiny of everyone right from birth... A *Chi* is a spiritual substance and therefore immortal. In fact, it is the life-giving and sustaining essence of a living man. The *Chi* leaves a man at death and its exit from man is what is called death because the *Chi* is likened to the breath of life. The *Chi* being a divine force is thought to be omniscient, can foresee danger, and is concerned only with the individual with whom it remains throughout his life time.

Njaka (1974: p. 32), for his part, thinks that "The *Chi* may be compared to the substantial form in matter. The *Chi* is the essence of any existence, animate or inanimate, but in man it is higher and has the most intelligence. The higher an object, the higher its *Chi*. The *Chi* sustains all beings and forms all things. It can be likened to the creative intelligence of God." Adibe (2009: p.69) posits that "the Igbo believe that one's *Chi* could be big and success-oriented or small and inauspicious {unfavourable}. Yet one could through sacrifices and prayers to the ancestors get more empowerment for one's *Chi* to improve in a higher degree of success or remain static in hardship within the Ajo *Chi* theory". Here *Chi* behaves like fate or destiny. As Ezekwugo (1987: p. 115-147) argues:

People say 'Obu Chi': It is fate/Divine Will; or 'obu onatalu CHI': It is consequential on providential decree. In this mode of expression CHI becomes synonymous with 'destiny', 'providence', 'fate'.... A Lucky person is 'onye Chi oma' (person of good luck/fortune) and Unlucky person is 'Onye CHI ojoo' (person of bad Luck/Fortune)...

Still the *Chi* seems to also be a kind of energy, spiritual energy there at a man's disposal; for "the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his chi says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his chi agreed. And not only his chi but his clan too, because it judged a man by the work of his hands" (Achebe 2008: p. 21).

So obviously, there is *chi* as a personal guide, there is *chi* as fate or destiny, there is *chi* as energy, spiritual energy and there is *chi* as God, the almighty God. From what the Igbo say about *chi*, we can get an idea of the relationship between man and his *chi*; for example the Igbo say *chim mu anya*, meaning that my God is ever watchful of me. The Igbo also say *onye kwe*, *chi ya ekwe*, meaning when a man says yes, his chi agrees. They also say: *chi mu egbuo mu*, meaning my *chi* has literally destroyed me; in other words, one's *chi* can literally stand aside and watch one go through hell or even get destroyed, just as it could stand by one and guide one through one's journeys on earth. For one's *chi* not to intervene in one's fate or intervenes shows that *chi* understands one beyond one's present existence. The *chi* knows one's life from the many incarnations and reincarnations and, therefore, understands what is in the best interest of one. However, at the sheer unleashing of active will, the *chi* simply yields to the will being itself active energy, hence the Igbo saying that *onye kwe*; *chi ya ekwe*: when a man says yes, his *chi* agrees.

Furthermore, the Igbo have their way of communing with God Almighty or Chi Ukwu or the great first cause. This they do in Omenana or Omenani or Omenala, which is their form of religion. As Ede (1985: pp. 123-145) argues:

Omenani is generic term for the body of Igbo socio-religious laws  
Customs and traditions passed from generation to generation and

Handed down to the ancestors from God, Chukwu, through the Earth-god {deity}. For the Igbos and evil is basically regarded an Offence against omenani. Even natural catastrophes and all sorts Of undesired occurrences in the universe are regarded as evils Because they disrupt the normal order of reality which is supposed To be preserved by omenani.

According to Ilona (2019: p. 37), “Omenana which means religion and culture that are to be done in the land is composed of three words. Ome, which in full means ‘things that are to be done’, na, which means ‘in the’, and ana which means ‘the land.’ Me is a verb. It means ‘to do’, ‘do’, ‘doing’”.

By articulating the positions of Schleiermacher, Otto and Durkheim, Adibe (2009: p. 225) defines religion as “the feeling of absolute dependence on the unified system of beliefs and practices with a normative relationship to the sacred, which generates a holy experience for the well-being of man and cherished reverence to the ultimate reality.” This definition is captured in Achebe’s *Arrow of God* in Ezeulu’s role in the well-being of his people is depicted. He is the mediator between Ulu and his people. Ulu is the deity of his people and he is the priest of Ulu. Just as he mediates between Ulu and his people, Ulu mediates between him and Chiukwu, the great God. This relationship with the sacred in which there is absolute dependence on the unified systems of belief typifies religion and in this instance, Igbo traditional religion. These unified systems of belief are lived out in “omenana” or “omenani” or “omenala”. As Adibe (p. 12) puts it again “omenani is a duty and commitment towards the deities, the ancestors and the community coupled with duties towards individual fellow human beings as a means of achieving justice, peace and order for good life in the community.”

Like the people of Umuaro in Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, every community in Igbo land has their deity and Chief Priest. The deity and the priest constitute the religious institution. The groves of the shrines or the little mud structures (okwu mmuo) constitute the sacred altars of the shrines. However, the religious institution in Igbo traditional religion does not constitute only the priest and the deity: there are shrine helpers, too, known generally as “osu”. This is so because it is known that people escape from persecution or kidnap for onwards sell into slavery by running into the shrines to take refuge. Once they do, they are regarded as having become dedicated to the deity and they commit themselves to the service of God through these deities. And according to Ogugua (2005: pp. 84-88) deities are there because the individuals in communities are committed to their individual welfare as well as the welfare of their communities. Therefore, Igbo traditional religion is about the spiritual, physical and communal well-being of the people and the community.

Omenani as we already know from Ilona (2019: p. 37) encompasses religion and culture in the Igbo world. The entirety of the Igbo life derives its meaning from Omenani, that is, religion and culture. The Igbo call upon “spirit” in the praxis of their religion, *Igo Mmuo*. Most often they call upon the spirits of their ancestors as well as the Spirit as in God. They also literally revere the Earth; she is part and parcel of God, divine, but her role in creation is completely cut out for her.

Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (2008), *Arrow of God* (1986), and Obioma Chigozie’s *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2018) textualize history at the cosmological and metaphysical level and by so doing they offer access to the spiritual world of the Igbo and make it tangible. According to Guam and Babike (2016: P. 205), “Many African societies worship a single God,



while some recognize a dual God. They do this by paying allegiance to the God through lesser deities. Some African societies deify entities like the earth, the sun, the sea, lighting or the nature. Each deity has its own priest or priestess”.

A

chebe’s (1986: p. 1) *Arrow of God* dramatizes the role of a deity and its priest among the people of Umuaro. As the narrator puts it

This was the third nightfall since he began to look for signs of the new moon. He knew it would come today but he always began his watch three days early because he must not take a risk. In this season of the year his task was not too difficult; he did not have to peer and search the sky as he might do when the rains came. Then the new moon sometimes hid itself for days behind rain clouds so that when it finally came out it was already half-grown. And while it played its game the Chief Priest sat up every evening waiting.

Umuaro is obviously a democratic theocracy; for Ezeulu has enormous powers over his people, but “whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real. It was true he named the day for feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and for the New Yam feast; but he did not choose it. He was merely a watchman. His power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his (Achebe 1986: p. 3). Here again one feels that there is republicanism in the democratic theocracy because the Chief Priest seems to understand that he is the servant to the gods and the people; that he is just a mediator between the people and Ulu, the deity of Umuaro; that the voice of the people would carry more weight than his own voice. In *Things Fall Apart* (2008), we see that wielding absolute power over the people is never contemplated in the collective being, for “fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father...” (Achebe 2008: p. 7); “but the Igbo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed. And not only his *chi* but his clan, too, because it judged a man by the work of his hands” (p. 21).

*An Orchestra of Minorities* (2018) by Chigozie Obioma dramatizes Igbo Cosmology through the story of Chinonso. The work makes the Igbo world able to be experienced and understood than any mythological account can. It further makes it possible for us to understand the nature of law, moral and natural justice; for when a man commits murder for example, he or she is judged to have committed a grievous crime. However, the intention may be of consequence in understanding whether or not the person is really guilty of murder and therefore deserves capital punishment or exile, as in the case of female *ochu*, that is, death unwittingly perpetrated. Chinonso unwittingly murders the girl he loves when he returns from Cyprus, and this is at the height of his despondency (Obioma, pp. 508-510) and so his *chi* tries to intervene on his behalf before the court of God. Indeed in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (2008), Okonkwo accidentally kills the son of Ezeudu during Ezeudu’s burial. As in the case of the murder committed by Chinonso in *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2018), so it is with the murder committed by Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (2008). In both works, especially in *Things Fall Apart* (2008), justice is served in the banishment of Okonkwo from Umuofia for seven years. Being a work set in contemporary times, unlike *Things Fall Apart* (2008), it should be expected that Chinonso, in *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2018) will be prosecuted in court for justice to be served. If the murder by Okonkwo and Chinonso were premeditated, they would face capital punishment, which is death by hanging. Therefore since Okonkwo’s crime is female *ochu*, the

only course open to him was to flee from the clan. His crime was a crime against the earth goddess; a man who committed it must flee from the land. “The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years” (p. 99). In the case of Chinonso, he has fulfilled all the requirements of being condemned to the eternal life of vagrancy being that he dies a failure with no wife or child or property; and above all he has done that “for which Ala or Ana or Ani, the custodian of the earth, must seek retribution –for Ala/Ana/Ani forbids that a person should harm a pregnant woman, whether man or beast –for the earth belongs to her, the great mother of mankind, the greatest among all creatures, second only to you, whose gender or kind no man or spirit knows –” (Obioma, 2018: p.10). Therefore, by the intercession of his guardian spirit or *chi* at the magnificent court of God in heaven, a case is made on Chinonso’s behalf, who runs the risk of being condemned to the fate of an Akaliogoli, because “a man’s soul can return to the world in the form of onyeuwa (incarnate spirit), to be reborn, only if that soul has been received in the domain of the ancestors” (Obioma, 2018: p.9).

As captured in the chart in the work, the spirit world, which coexists with the physical world, is a place of sundry mystical activities. There, all kinds of spirits exist in the various regions depending on their consistencies (see Abd-ru-Shin, 1998: p. 356-359) – and this is so because there are ghosts and other vagrant spirits, *ajoonmuo* or evil spirits, *akaliogoli* or spirits of the condemned, etc. interestingly enough, guardian spirits or *chi* exist also in the spirit world; and because they are essentially good spirits, they exist there in the region consistent with their nature, hence caves of the guardian spirits.

Here on earth, a part of the universe, live human beings, animals, plants, forests, etc. The world itself has its elements too –elements as water, air, light and the firmament or the sky as represented on the chart in the work. However, the guardian spirits have their places in the caves of our being, and so coexist with us to guide us. This cave, according to the chart, is a layer after the first layer, which is the body or *arummadu*. The third layer is the mind, part of which is also spirit, incarnate spirit of avatar or *onyeuwa*.

Although Chinonso’s *chi*’s plea is before the court of God in the realm of the spirits, yet it is like a court on earth, where a lawyer tries to persuade a judge, in whose hands is life and death, that his or her client committed the crime of murder in error and unknowingly. Recall that in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo also committed murder or manslaughter or female *ochu* and had to be sent away on exile to his mother’s place for seven years. Female *ochu* is not premeditated and so weighs lighter in comparison to serious murder.

Cases of murder are always cases committed against the Earth and it is always a grievous crime. In Obioma’s *The Fishermen*, Boja kills his brother Ikenna, who fear ate up like a fungus. Boja himself commits suicide because he let anger get the better of him. By committing murder and killing himself, he literally offends the Earth, which is a component of God. The Earth or Ana or Ala in Igbo Cosmology is considered an extension of God hence it is regarded as a goddess. As the narrator posits in Obioma’s *An Orchestra of Minorities*, in the Igbo worldview, “that which came before is a corollary to that which follows it” (p. 22); the implication, therefore, is that Chinonso’s life has its root in the cosmic, whereby that which came before his life on earth is corollary to that which follows his existence in the material world. The circumstances surrounding his life are such that we can see. His parents have died and left him all by himself. He takes over the poultry business and the course of his life opens a window through which we can speculate on the nature of that which came before in his life. As Okafor (1992: p. 27) states:

The Igbo’s belief in reincarnation is closely linked with their belief in

Immortality. It is strongly held by the Igbo that an ancestor could be Reborn in a child. The particular ancestor so reborn is recognised in The child. When there is doubt as to which ancestor has reincarnated, The fortune-teller may be consulted. The child believed to be a Reincarnated ancestor is addressed sometimes by the name of the ancestor.

As can be seen from the quote above, conception has a mythical and mystical essence, because a beloved ancestor may decide to return to the world to give joy through being born to a loved one through reincarnation. The process of reincarnation is an essential part of the incarnate spirit's journey of maturation and fulfilment. But as Nwosu (2014: 259), quoting Ilogu (1974) puts it:

Indeed, the quality of the reincarnation available to a soul is an assessment of the quality of life led by the man when alive. If a man dies after living an honourable life, he is expected to join the ancestral spirits (Ndi-ichie). He will also reincarnate to loved ones. If on the other hand, he dies after a wicked sojourn on earth, he becomes an evil spirit (ajo mmuo) and may not even reincarnate to the human race. If a man dies unnaturally and as a failure, no wives, no children and no property, it is that he will roam the spirit realm as an unsettled spirit (Akaliogoli).

From birth through childhood to adulthood and old age uprightness is emphasized as a precondition of being an elder or *onye ichie*, a status the one carries into the beyond *Be-ndi-ichie* or *Ala-ndi-ichie* or domain of the ancestors, which is situated in the proximity of *Bechukwu* or domain of God, which itself is outside the universe. The passage to the domain of the ancestors is usually celebrated in funeral rites of passage, represented as first and second burial in the chart in Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*.

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo and Obierika entertained the thought that "Nwoye took much of his grandfather" (58). According to Mary JanePatrick Nwakaego Okolie and Ginikachi Christian Uzoma (2019) in their paper entitled "Okonkwo's Reincarnation: A Comparison of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*":

The message of "the second coming" which preludes Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is rather unveiled in his *No Longer at Ease*. It is the second coming of Okonkwo, whose first coming has been cut short by a force foreign and strange to him and his people but which he has rather seen as occasioned by his people. And interestingly too, the excerpt from T.S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi" which preludes *NLE* ends with a thought-provoking line: "I should be glad of another death" (line 4). This entails that Okonkwo's second coming is not accompanied by the fear of the failure that had encumbered and beclouded his first coming; since he is no longer at ease, he is ready for whatever, even a second death. This becomes evident in the life of Obi, who never shows any remorse or shamefacedness for the disappointments he brings his father and Umuofia in *NLE*. The only remorse Obi feels at any time is for himself and for Clara, and not for Umuofia nor for his father.(5-8).

Their paper argues that Okonkwo came back in the body of Obi Okonkwo to take revenge on his son Nwoye for desecrating the customs and traditions of his people by joining the Whiteman's religion and also his people of Umuofia for not fighting to defend their customs



and tradition from the ravages of foreign religion. Okonkwo's utter despondence could be captured in his inner turmoil:

But on further thought he told himself that Nwoye was not worth fighting for. Why, he cried in his heart, should he, Okonkwo, of all people, be cursed with such a son? He saw clearly in it the finger of his personal god or *chi*. For how else could he explain his great misfortune and exile and now his despicable son's behavior? Now that he had time to think of it, his son's crime stood out in its stark enormity. To abandon the gods of one's father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god. If such a thing were ever to happen, he, Okonkwo, would wipe them off the face of the earth. (137)

Whatever Obi feels for Clara was not enough to make him go against his people to marry her: his people do not think he should marry Clara because she is "osu". This brings us to the issue of religion in Igbo traditional society

### Discussion

Indeed, Achebe was a writer who always raised questions, caused headaches and even rattled authorities. He did raise questions about a lot of things in our society, but we have been selective in engaging these issues, one of which is the 'osu' question. This is a topic Ndi Igbo dread and almost certainly want to avoid discussing. Therefore, it is extremely important to interrogate this issue of 'osu' raised by Achebe in his work, *No Longer at Ease* and even *Things Fall Apart* and by so doing, as Lord Byron or George Gordon expected literature to do, we would "save our souls and heal the state", in this case, Igbo land. When that becomes the case, we will not need the church or law to ban the 'osu' institution, which is an integral part of Igbo Religion. The many useless accretions to it would simply fall apart!

*No Longer At Ease*, begins with a court trial of Obi that takes place a while after his return from studying abroad. It uses flashbacks and works its way backward to explain how Obi has come to be charged with accepting a bribe, a scene that takes us back to the beginning of the text. As a modernist text, it raises questions and brutally allows for unavoidable tragedy or "tragic necessity":

Obi Okonkwo is a young man, about twenty-six years old, and he returns to Nigeria after studying in England at a university for four years.

The Umuofia Progressive Union (U.P.U) gave him a scholarship to study law in England, a scholarship that Obi has to pay back upon his return. And, thus, he leaves for England, stopping in Lagos on the way out. While in England, several things happen to him. First, he changes his course of study to English and abandons law. Second, he finds himself nostalgic for home, writing poems about Nigeria. Finally, he meets a girl named Clara at a dance in London but fails to make a good impression. However, the girl is Nigerian also, and on Obi's boat ride back home, after nearly four years in England, he meets Clara once again. This time, they begin a

relationship.

Obi Okonkwo, in spite of the pangs of guilty conscience for taking bribes and in spite of having decided to stop after the last one, gets caught and his fall starts relentlessly.

Again, in spite of his love for Clara, he never gets to marry her because of her 'osu' status. Clara is a strong-willed woman, educated and opinionated. She is conscious of her 'osu' stigma but does not allow it to get in her way. She wants any man who wants to marry her to be very strong-willed and courageous. She does not think Obi Okonkwo is, that is why she does not want to see him anymore after being hospitalized. The unsaid thing about Clara not wanting to see Obi Okonkwo any more –and this is apparently the message of the text –is the belief that those who have been liberated by the knowledge inherent in education must be truly liberated and be seen to be so!

To historicise "osu" in the text *No Longer at Ease* by Achebe is to imply that this is the case in history; but using Ferdinand De Saussure's structuralism, we can actually isolate the phenomenon and treat it purely for what it is. From Saussure's idea of language as a complete system of signs that can be synchronically studied, sign consists of the signifier, which is the sound we make and the signified, which is the meaning we ascribe to the sound we make. Interestingly enough, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. In other words, the meanings we ascribe to things have no direct connections to those things except that through social conventions, we accept the meanings to mean what we pronounce them to be. In other words, we could actually treat the signified as nonsense. For example, according to the narrator in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*:

"Osu" is a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart – a taboo forever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the freeborn. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste – long, tangled dirty hair. A razor was a taboo to him. An Osu could not attend an assembly of the freeborn, and they, in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest. How could such a man be a follower of Christ? (Achebe 1959, p.156)

But as Orji (2004) states, "The Osu, by definition, is a people sacrificed to the gods in Igbo community. And they assist the high priest of the traditional religion to serve the deities or the gods in their shrine". For his part, Onyemaechi (n.d) defines "osu" as a 'cult slave,' a living sacrifice,' an 'untouchable,' 'outcast,' 'owner's cult,' 'a slave of the deity,' and a 'sacred and holy being, etc. Furthermore, Orji (2004) asserts that being the agents of the deities the 'Osu' maintained an aloof relationship with the rest of the civil society. He, further explains that about six centuries ago, the growth in number of powerful deities created the need for many assistants for the high priests of major shrines. Miniature 'monasteries' were established in the vicinity of major shrines to train and maintain a constant supply of high-priest assistants. And because some of these deities are believed to be very powerful, they should be attended to on continuous basis, with intricate religious rituals in their shrines. However, the "indigenous monks," upon mastering their spiritual functions (of learning to serve the gods) were unjustly and erroneously assigned the Igbo pejorative name of 'Osu'

Nwosu (1999) for his part argues that evidence suggests that the Osu were originally regarded with “respect and honour” apparently because they belonged to the gods. This show of respect for those who attended to the shrines, unfortunately, transformed into social ostracism. For Basden (1966), in the nineteenth century, the numbers of those regarded as “osu” expanded and their status deteriorated dramatically, so that they became outcasts, feared and despised or even abhorred. Dike (2002) argues that oral history would say that the ‘Osu’ is isolated because they “steal” and are “dishonest.” Yet, other stories would say that the Diala abhor those branded Osu because they are “dirty” or that they have “repulsive body odor” and are “lazy.” However, there is no empirical evidence to support these inhumane assertions.

In spite of all these positions, many of which agree and disagree with the picture painted by the narrator in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* with regard to the “osu”, let us take ‘osu’ as a linguistic sign: Clara being the referent or physical representation of ‘osu’, while the various definitions will be the ‘signified’ whose relationship to the ‘sign’ is arbitrary; therefore, we suspend belief in them and concentrate, through the formal method, on the linguistic sign “osu”.

So we look at a similar linguistically relevant unit of sound, example: isu.

isu =to burn

osu: not yet known; however, and obviously

The su in isu and the su in osu belong to the same linguistically relevant unit of sounds; therefore, structurally, the words belong together:

isu oku: then, will be: to set fire on; while

osu oku: will be he who sets fire on. Here there is a connotation of delight, love and dedication to setting fire on something. Let us see similar examples:

igbu efi = to kill a cow

Ogbu efi = He who kills a cow

igba egbe = to shoot a gun

Ogba egbe = he who shoots a gun

igbu mma = to cut with a machete

Ogbu mma = he who cuts with a machete

Observe again:

isu oku = to set on fire

Osu oku = he who sets on fire

If we consider that a religion is involved, we can begin to associate ‘osu oku’ to one who burns offering or takes delight in or loves or is committed to burning something of sacrificial nature. Essentially, the one possesses great skill and mastery in one’s calling and the one performs the duty with certain gusto.

Recall that Ilona, Eluwa, Basden, W. F. Daniel and many more have tried to prove the connectedness of the Igbo to ancient Hebrew: they have traced this connection in culture and practices and even in language. Therefore, one could say that there is a similarity between the Igbo and ancient Hebrews in regard of religious and cultural practices. In fact, it is unreasonable for ‘osu’ to mean any other thing apart from someone who helps in the works of the shrine; for example, attending to sacrifices; this being the case, all previous definitions that align to this, fall into place with it.

Note that this new meaning is derived from structural and formal approaches and is independent of the other meanings attached to the being of ‘osu’ by conventions. If this is to be so, then we will consider now the Igbo traditional religion in its unmixed form.

It is a known fact that before the coming of Europeans to Igbo Land, Igbo ancestors worship God in many ways. Whether they worshipped God as Aja ani/ana/ala, or Amadioha, etc., what is indisputable was and still is, that like every other peoples they yearned for that which is Almighty, God or Chukwu. One must imagine that there was no incursion into Igbo country and no spreading of the Christian Gospel, in order to appreciate how the evolving of the Igbo people would be; for example, one could imagine how priests were chosen.

### **How could priests have been chosen?**

Essentially, the first inhabitants of a town would have ways of seeking the face of Chukwu or God, and communing with ancestors and usually the oldest man there would be the one to offer prayers and perform rituals; so through that means, a priest emerges at the family level and unit. There could be other ways going forward in the life of a family that has become a community on how to choose the priest.

If the oldest man of the oldest family in a community was the priest of his household, then naturally, his male children would be assisting him in the shrine, especially where sacrifices would be involved. They would be the ones to accept sacrifices from people and they would be the ones to assist in making burnt sacrifices. In short, they would be *ndi na esu aja oku!* Or *ndi osu aja oku*/those who prepare the ritual animal by roasting it, because they are helpers to their father, who functions as the priest.

So naturally, if the sons did not have male children or their children were too young to help, then those who have taken refuge in the shrine would, willingly, become consecrated for the service. So, whatever is sacrificed at the shrine or brought there, the father (priest) would take some and ask his children to share the rest among themselves. His sons would grow and become priests of their households and their household would become a town consisting of the children of the old man. As a town now, the need for a common shrine cannot be over-emphasized.

The shrine is a sacred place (grove) of worship of Chukwu and where sacrifices happen. According to Ezeanya (1966) a sacred place may be a large square with a shrine dedicated to a divinity in a village or small altars in the fields or even domestic shrines in the home where the father of a family offers *kolanut* to the ancestors and the tutelary spirits every morning. For Kalu in Ofomata (2002) the sacredness of these places is usually preserved by taboos and sanctions. Certain parts are restricted to different categories of persons. The grove or the stream located in such sacred places might not be accessible at certain days and periods. Only persons dedicated to the (services of the) deity as *osu* may stay overnight in the sacred grounds of the deity without incurring grave consequences.

From the foregoing, one can strongly deduce that *Osu* is revered, feared and at once also respected. This is evident in the fact that people, who may never have had anything to do with shrine service began to bear names related to shrine helpers and shrine services; examples: *Osuji*, *Nwosu*, *Osuigwe*, *Osuchukwu*, *Osuagwu*, *Osueke*, *Osuama*, etc. It is incontrovertible that names are what we bear proudly. They also tell stories and are even codes to our past, present and even future. We give our children names of things or individual or events we love or have greatly influenced us. Once given, we wear them proudly.

It has to be noted carefully that from the structural and formal approaches, we know that ‘*osu*’ was derived from ‘*isu*’ because of the structural relatedness of the linguistically relevant unit of sounds. Therefore, it is easy to deduce that the connotations of awe, divine service, invincibility, un-touchability accreted to the sign ‘*osu*’, hence the giving of names that refer to shrine service to children through many generations by parents.

## Findings

From investigations, it was discovered that it was unusual to forcefully dedicate anyone to shrine service. Informants reliably informed the researcher that:

Informant 1: outbreak of disease (cholera) made his ancestor leave their village and went into the services of a certain Aja ana whose chief priest was a certain Ajaegbu. It was hoped that by humbly submitting to Aja ana, the disease ravaging their village and killing their people would vanish

Informant 2: Ancestor was a target of kidnap by Aro slave merchants and he took refuge at Aja ana.

Informant 3: people willingly gave themselves over to temple (shrine) service and there was nothing evil about it.

## Analysis of Findings

The implication of these informant views is a proposition that the “osu” that fit into the picture painted by the narrator on Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, must have been a war prisoner captured and given a mark to set him apart and forced to live around market squares. It is also highly probable that it was at that point of capturing strangers or victims of war and forcefully dedicating them to temple service that the bastardization of the institution began until it fell into disrepute and disparagement. It is also highly probable that at that point, the priests had also turned their occupation into a criminal enterprise of money extortion and sundry vices.

### Therefore, hypothesis 1:

Forcefully dedicating war prisoners to shrine service contributed to the demeaning of the service

### Hypothesis 2:

The growing influence of the ‘osu’ over the chief priests exposed them to envy, jealousy and even hatred because ordinary citizens found it ennobling to give their children names that point to temple service; for example, nwsu, osuagwu, osuigwe, etc.

### Hypothesis 3:

The advent of Christianity with her converts further demonized traditional religion and even more so the ‘osu’. The consequences are politics of intimidation, politics of stigmatization and eventual reducing of the institution to mockery. As recounted in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, with the incursion of Christianity, the weak and battered as the ‘osu’ first took refuge under it.

## Conclusion

Texts are, no doubt, veritable sources of information and knowledge. One may decide, as a literature scholar, to study them for their own sake whereby it is believed that the text is a world of its own capable of yielding knowledge through its various discursive formations. However, because the text is produced by a writer, who lives in society, it is impossible to pretend that its content is not lived experiences of men and women in society. Texts as Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* as well as Chigozie Obioma’s *The Fishermen and An Orchestra of Minorities* have been helpful in enabling understanding of the Igbo World. Through them we have gained insight into Igbo cultural and religious practices.

The origin of the Igbo will continue to generate debate until scientific research settles it, if it can. The belief of the Igbo about death is that it is not the end but a transition: they believe in the eternal returning of all. They also believe that our righteous ancestors reside in the proximity of God. Their religion evolved from the things done on the land or omenana and



their religious institution comprises the priests and shrine or temple helper, the osu. The word osu is almost anathema in Igbo land because of the misinformation surrounding it.

Many Igbo people bear names that are associated with osu even when they are not osu. Besides names are badges people wear very proudly; therefore, it makes mockery of logic when people proudly bear names associated with osu and yet osu is termed outcast and abominable. Any attempt to malign the osu institution is to malign Igbo traditional religion.

It was important to reveal the Igbo world through texts and to ensure that in doing that, every mangled record is straightened through bold interrogations and scientific isolations so that in the end, the things were seen for what they are without useless accretions.

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