

Exploring Human Rights in Traditional Igbo Society: A Study of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* And Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*

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Abstract

This paper entitled “Exploring Human Rights and Traditional Igbo Society in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones*” examines the portrayal of the complex interplay between traditions and modernity in the light of human rights policies and its impact on societal norms and cultural practices in a pre-colonial Igbo society. This paper employs a qualitative approach in identifying the concepts of justice and equity related to the pre-colonial Igbo society. It applies two qualitative research designs; ethnographical and historical as it is based on the colonial history of the Igbos while interrogating their practices and customs. Situating this research in postcolonial criticism, this paper interrogates the tensions arising from the clash between indigenous customs and European impositions in a bid to highlight the human rights and justice systems within the African tradition. The analysis reveals the intricate dynamics of human rights within the traditional Igbo society. It also exposes conflict resolution tactics as well as gender dynamics and relationships. It divulges the imposition of European practices on well-established norms and customs leading to profound shifts in societal dynamics. This research contributes to scholarly discourse on African literature, human rights and cultural studies by offering a nuanced examination into Achebe and Ezeigbo’s portrayals of tradition and justice. Based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that further research explores the implications of African narratives for contemporary discourses on human rights and cultural preservation.

Keywords: Achebe, Ezeigbo, Human Rights, Justice, Pre-colonial Igbo society.



Introduction

Post-colonial African literature stands as a landmark offering profound insights into the complexities of human existence at a tumultuous period. *Things Fall Apart* and *The Last of the Strong Ones* particularly explore the intricate interplay between tradition and European imposition and its influence in the shaping of Igbo customs and norms. These novels serve as a poignant reflection on the fragility of tradition and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of external forces.

In this paper, we embark on a critical exploration of the themes of human rights and justice in the backdrop of colonial imposition and influence while unraveling the African idea of justice and fairness. The relevance of these texts in contemporary discourse on human rights and tradition cannot be overstated. It contributes positively to building our African identity while acknowledging the struggles and triumphs inherent in the quest for dignity and self-determination.

Contrary to colonial narratives, African traditional societies had well established customs and practices set to govern and ensure justice before the advent of colonialism. The traditional Igbo society in particular, an ethnic group in modern Nigeria, rich in cultural heritages and customs, had their methods and means of resolving conflicts and dissension.

The pre-colonial Igbo ran an acephalous society like the Ibibios and Tivs, independent and conscious of their separate identities as each representative of every homestead was bound in a strict belief of descending from the same progenitor (Ego-Alowes 35; Okoko et al. 4). Thus, their system of governance was based on the principle of democracy though decentralized to give every homestead a chance to contribute in decisions that affected the community.

Human Rights and the Traditional Igbo system

Human Rights according to the United Nations is a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and organ of society shall strive to promote and respect with emphasis on rights to life and liberty as well as freedom of opinion and expression (UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights). This definition implies that human rights is both universal (applicable everywhere) and egalitarian (same for everyone). The first five rights according to the United Nations are: Rights to Life and Liberty, Freedom from slavery and Torture, Freedom of opinion and Expression and the Right to Work and Education. These laws were created after the Second World War and the treatment of those considered inferior during the Holocaust. European contact with Africa termed the continent primitive as evident in the District Commissioner's remarks after discovering Okonkwo's body. They held dismissive and reductionist perspectives of the customs and traditions of the indigenous people because they found those customs strange and different from theirs.

However, there are theorists in contention against the universality of human rights which is highly supported by the American Anthropological Association (Dahiru et al.). They argue that the stance of universal human rights disregards the cultural differences of various societies.



Based on cultural relativism, our understanding of a culture is influenced by individual/societal perspectives. Thus, a culture's perspective on human rights and justice might differ from another's. The traditional Igbo found a way to balance justice and political administration using their reverence for the spiritual as a fulcrum for justice and equity (Nwankwo 176).

Theoretical Framework

This research examines the historical context of justice and human rights from a postcolonial perspective for the evaluation and interpretation of the texts. As a theoretical framework, post-colonialism is concerned with the evaluation of narratives on imperialism. Young claims that post-colonial theory was birthed with the Tricontinental journal of 1966 which was initiated by the first global alliance of the people of Africa, Asia and Latin America against colonialism (5). Habib notes notable pioneering texts on post-colonialism such as Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, Achebe's seminal text; *Things Fall Apart* and Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* to mention a few. Other notable post-colonial critics are Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin and Homi Bhabha who have contributed immensely to our understanding of post-colonialism as a theory and as a framework.

As a framework, it has adopted several aims such as to re-examine colonialism from the perspective of the colonised as well as to determine the economic, political and cultural impact of colonialism on the colonised (Young 6; Habib 272; Tyson 424). For Tyson, post-colonialism focuses on literatures of culture developed as a response to British domination.

Thus, the application of this theory is to examine the historicity of human rights as depicted in novels centred on the pre-colonial Igbo society.

***Things Fall Apart* as a Response to Colonialism**

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is recognized as the first African novel which was published in 1958 as a rewrite to the empire. Kenalemang's analysis of the text describes it aptly as a response to European depiction of Africans savages. He examines Achebe's presentation of the text as a revelation of both the strength and imperfections of the Igbo culture in order to reveal the humanness of the people. He also examines the influence of colonialism on the Igbo society. In similar fashion, Hasan et al illustrate the purpose of the text as a critique of colonialism while focusing on the psychological effects of dissension on the people as individuals and a collectivity. A'yunin's study on the effects of cultural colonialism leads to two questions; first, how is the Igbo culture portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* and secondly, what are the effects of colonialism on that culture? This analysis focuses on the social organizations of the Igbo culture especially marriage and religion with findings on the decimation of the culture. Mengara illuminates the five stages of colonialism explored in the text. The paper states exploration, expropriation, appropriation, exploitation and justification as the five stages and claims their importance for domination of the indigenes. The paper positions the text as a fictional representation of colonial intrusion which fits the mold for colonial oppression. Despite the prevalence of criticism and opinions on the negativity of colonialism, Purwarno's paper explores the redeeming feats of colonialism in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Although he acknowledges



that colonialism is often perceived as evil irrespective of the discourse, he analyses colonialism from the historical lens of brutal exploitation while highlighting the advancement and progress gained through colonial contact. The advancements he lists are churches, schools, hospitals, courts, government and trade.

This research interrogates colonialism from the perspective of decimation of the indigenous cultures. It also attempts to prove that though the traditional Igbo did not have established systems of justice like the West, they had their form of legal system where people got justice and fair hearing.

Equity in *The Last of the Strong Ones*

In examining Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*, critics often take a feminist lens to the concepts explored in the texts. Uka & Wosu interrogate patriarchy and women in a traditional African society. They analyse Ezeigbo's creation of bold and courageous female characters in a bid to tackle patriarchy in literary texts. They argue that the poor representation of women in African literature stems from the patriarchal nature of the African society. Using feminist criticism in particular, womanism to interrogate the concept of patriarchy they insist on the recognition of women as human beings, not inferior to their male counterparts. Their conclusion views women as assertive and achievers if given a chance. In like manner, Ladele explores the importance of reconstructing gender identities as well as national relations. She explores the ideology that post-colonial women writers textualize women's identities through fictional narratives as women are dominated in a male-centric culture that devalues them. Wosu and Jane in examining the discourse of gender and power in Ezeigbo's text, mention the prevalence of patriarchy in African cultures and its role in the marginalisation of women. They interrogate several cultural practices like secession rites, female genital mutilation, widowhood rites, polygamy etc. that work against the liberation of women in patriarchal structures. They state that these practices are further reinforced by written texts to maintain the status quo of dominance against the woman. They place Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as one of the texts used to reinforce patriarchal values as the text presents a society that excludes women from the corridors of power. They analyse Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* as a rewrite/response to what they describe as Achebe's male-chauvinism, seeking to place the Igbo woman in her appropriate spot in a historical context. Azumurana chronicles the burden of African women in a male-dominated space and the survival strategies adopted by those women to subvert patriarchy. In his analysis of Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* and Emecheta's *Double Yoke*, he points that both women are of different generations with different settings for their narratives, both are concerned with creating a space for themselves and their characters. Odewumi explores the empowerment of women before and during colonialism especially their [re]actions to power in male-dominant societies. She finds that women empowerment is driven by financial strength of women in their social environments.

This research will take a different path to interrogate the text from the perspective of social justice and balance.



This balance is often reflected in rituals, festivals and ceremonies as in the annual “Egwugwu” ceremony explored in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* which represents their ancestors showcasing their justice system and social hierarchy. Aside the interplay between religion and justice in the traditional Igbo system, there is a consistent use of language to portray their customs in relation to human rights and justice. This is evident in parables, idioms, folklores and other linguistic and archaeological sources. To understand the depth of human rights in the traditional Igbo setting, linguistic elements such as proverbs, idioms and names are to be examined to get a sense of justice, fairness and equity that pervades that society. Below are some notable examples:

- i) “*Egbe bereugoberenkesiibeyaabelankukwapuya*” (let the kite perch and let the eagle perch also, whichever denies the other its perching right, let its wings break off).

This explains that everyone has individual rights and privileges and there is no room for favoritism.

- ii) “*Onyeanywuna ma ibeyaefuna*” (Let nobody die nor let his neighbor get lost)

A clear implication of the right to protection of life and property of every individual and communal welfare.

- iii) “*ofumkpulu aka lutammanu o zuendiozono*” (when one finger gets soaked with palm oil, it quickly spreads to other fingers)

This explains social corporate and collective responsibility for actions taken and the importance attached to good and evil as it affects the community.

- iv) “*Onye jeakwutoolunchinanchiadighialiene*” (whoever has palm nut let him drop some to grass cutter because it does not climb).

This explains the foundation of fairness, empathy and humanitarian service as guiding forces of the Igbo traditional society. Other example of proverbs that portray equality of all men includes “*Isi ntutu a koroibeya*” which means no individual human being is greater than the other.

Politically, the traditional Igbo system though democratic, was strictly patrilineal – led by the ‘umunna’ a group of men descending from the lineage of the same father but not the same mother often presided by the eldest male (Chigere 113).

Being an egalitarian and acephalous society, the actual organ of administration was the village council consisting of the leaders of various families or compound “Ndichie” (elders). These elders were their compound’s mouth- piece as well as earthly representatives of their family ancestors. Her political organization was based on a republican system of government which guaranteed its citizens equity witnessed by the Portuguese who first arrived in the 15th Century (Ilogu 11). In *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Ezeigbo aptly throws more light on this egalitarian system in which both men and women had equal rights to participate in governance.



“It was also necessary to recreate and propagate a vivid and memorable account of the lives of the four main actors among the Umuada. They were the Oluada...they were the voice of the women (Ezeigbo 2).

The “Obufo” represent the village council which is made up of notable men and women of virtue and uprightness: “Oluada and Umuada”. This is a clear indication that traditional Igbo society had embedded the principle of equality amongst gender and right to equal representation and participation which is an important human right policy even in present times.

***Things Fall Apart*— Chinua Achebe**

Case I: Inter-Clan Dispute

The Igbo traditional society has always been that in which deliberations, meetings, and caution are being exercised before any course of action is taken irrespective of the severity of the case. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe brings to light this laudable trait in the threatened war between Umuofia and Mbaino.

“Gome, gome, gome, gome, boomed the hollow metal, and then the town crier gave his message...Every group of Umuofia was asked to gather at the market place tomorrow morning” (7).

One of Umuofia’s daughter had been murdered by an Mbainoman and this was a direct confrontation to Umuofia in which war was imminent yet a conference is called, this proves beyond any reasonable doubt that Umuofia though the aggrieved believed in the voice of the people(a democratic trait) and also believed in dialogue rather than direct confrontation (Freedom of Expression)

“Many other spoke and at the end it was decided to follow the normal course of action. An ultimatum was immediately dispatched to Mbaino asking them to choose between war on one hand and on the other the offer of a young man and a virgin as compensation”. (8)

“And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its oracle”. (9)

In resolution of the impending crises, Mbaino clan acceded to the request of Umuofia and as such war is averted. This is a clear display of sportsmanship between both clans and a clear democratic trait which has always been prevalent in the Igbo traditional society since time immemorial. This is a justification of the fact that human right issues as regards conflicts even beyond a village had procedures, simple rules that governed the dispensation of justice and were mostly settled in justice and fairness.



“And so when Okonkwo of Umuofia arrived at Mbiano as the proud and imperious emissary of war, he was treated with great honour and respect and two days later, he returned home with a lad of fifteen and a young virgin”. (9)

Dialogue, negotiation, and peace meetings have always been a core of the Igbo society despite Umuofia’s justification to declare war. Considering their superiority in men and arms, they chose dialogue as a means of resolution. This amicable trait clearly shows that the Igbos before colonization had a clear grasp on the concepts of justice, fairness, rule of law and due process which are still relevant even in today’s society.

Case II: Maintenance Of Law And Order

Adherence to the laws of the land by all and sundry has been a guiding force in the day to day running of the Igbo traditional society. Great emphasis is placed on obedience and observance and any act to the contrary attracts sanctions which are meant as deterrents to offenders and lessons for all. This is made to ensure the society is peaceful and orderly (Right of the state to protect its citizens) a key fundamental human right till date.

In chapter four of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, a case in point is drawn where a direct disobedience and violation by Okonkwo during the week of peace incurs the wrath of the community and is punished as is the custom by the priest of the earth goddess, Ezeani.

In this chapter Okonkwo’s youngest wife Ojiugo goes visiting a friend and couldn’t return early to prepare his meal, this action greatly provokes him and being a man known for his short temper and anger bursts, he reacts on impulse.

“He walked back to his obi to await Ojiugo’s return and when she returned he beat her very heavily in his anger he has forgotten that it was the week of peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week”. (23)

“...some of them came over to see for themselves it was unheard of to beat somebody during the sacred week”. (24)

As is the custom, Ezeani, the priest of the earth visits Okonkwo in response to the sacrilege committed.

“Take away your kolanut, I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors”. (24)

“You are not a stranger in Umuofia you know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbor... You will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she goat, one hen, a length of cloth and hundred cowries”. (24)



Igbo traditional society has always been governed by laws and customs handed down by their ancestors over time and these laws have helped sustain and guide the people at all times. Maintenance of such laws is very vital to the survival of people and has always ensured that peace prevailed. This is a further justification that human right principles are deeply embedded in the day to day governance of Igbo traditional society over time.

Case III: Dispute Resolution

Chinua Achebe aptly describes a traditional dispute resolution procedure which in all fairness throws more light on the level of advancement of Igbo traditional society and human rights issues even before westernization.

Igbo traditional society being an egalitarian one revolves round the principle of equal and fair representation, open dialogue and fair dispensation of justice.

In chapter ten, Chinua Achebe re-enacts a dispute resolution scene where two cases, one a fight between a married couple and the second a great land case.

“I don’t know why such a trifle should come before the Egwugwu said one elder to another”. (75)

It should be noted that in Igbo traditional society when it comes to dispensation of justice no case is termed unimportant or trivial. Both cases were given equal attention as it deserved.

In dispute resolution equal representation is very vital and this was clearly practiced by pre-colonial Igbo society.

“Each of the nine Egwugwu represented a village of the clan”. (71)

This was so in order for a just resolution of conflict and avoidance of conflict of interest and clear conscience. In the case in point each aggrieved party was represented equally and both sides given the opportunity to present its case. This is a clear representation of fairness, dialogue and justice.

“We have heard both sides of the case said Evil forest; our duty is not to blame this man or praise that, but to settle the dispute”. (74)

This is classical display of professionalism and great expertise. That the Egwugwu did not take sides show that its goal was in the interest of peace and not conflict. This sadly is lacking in our present day society where people are guilty even before they are charged and where justice has been denied in line with tribalism, self interest and corruption.

Fair trial, a fundamental right of every individual, has been an age long custom of the Igbo traditional society and this greatly helped in maintaining the peace even in a society that was clearly acephalous in nature and decentralized in structure. This is captured in chapter 13 in the



ill-fated death of one of the sons of late Ezeudu during his funeral by Okonkwo's gun which shot the boy in error.

“It was as if a spell had been cast all was silent in the centre of the crowd a boy lay in a pool of blood, it was the dead man's sixteen years old son ... Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart”. (99)

According to the laws and custom of the land, where cause of death is accidental, the punishment was clearly different from an intentional cause of death. This was the case of Okonkwo who in error had killed the boy. Chinua Achebe beautifully portrays the level of advancement of the traditional Igbo society and the standardization of law and order. Despite the fact that a life was lost, justice and fair play ruled the day. It should be noted that there were no trial lawyers to defend the accused or prosecutors rather there were set of laws and guiding principles handed down by their ancestors which was relevant in settlement of human right issues of this magnitude.

“It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman and a man who committed it must flee the land. The crime was of two kinds male and female. Okonkwo committed the female, because it had been inadvertent, he could return to the clan after seven years”. (99)

This is a clear example to show that traditional Igbo society practiced, maintained and enforced human right policy and debunks any claim that pre-colonial Igbo society had no laws and tradition.

The Last Of The Strong Ones --- AkachiAdimora – Ezeigbo

Case I: Criminal Matters

In traditional Igbo society every individual had the right to life and any member that consciously attacked a fellow indigene had to face the consequences of the laws of the land. However, before such decisions are carried out a resolution and fact finding mission is often set in motion.

This is seen in chapter sixteen and ten of Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* where a quarrel between Onyekozuru and Abazu nearly cost the life of Onyekozuru. During the meeting of the Umuada, Onyekozuru had suggested her brother-in-law as a medium to write a letter of complaint to the Kosiri (White people) which backfired as the content of the complaint was misrepresented and as such misinterpreted by the Kosiri. This was a very dire situation that put the whole of Umuada at the brink of war with the Kosiri.

“Abazu...I do not like your words replied Onyekozuru; I do not like the form your words are taking in this matter...What have I said that is not true...You brought us a dishonest man who has caused us trouble”. (58)



This exchange of words between them despite pleadings from other members of the Umuada led to Onyekozuru revealing a very deadly secret about Abazu which centered on his potency as a man and which shocked the entire Umuada and enraged Abazu. In a bid not to disintegrate the Umuada and the collective peace of Umuga, a peace mission was sent to both parties to settle the dispute.

“After this discussion, Obiatu mentioned the quarrel between Abazu and Onyekozuru ... this issue was discussed and in the end three people were given task of making peace between them... they were told to perform the task with the seriousness it demanded and as soon as possible”. (111)

However, Abazu in his anger shot Onyekozuru in her compound and in a bid to escape punishment and the fact that it was a sacrilege he had committed, attempted suicide. Fortunately for Onyekozuru she survived the attempted murder. When the incident occurred, the village council quickly took immediate steps, first in saving the life of the injured and secondly apprehending the accused.

“...Umuada were there in full strength and we marveled at the speed news spread... the wound had been treated with herbs and bound with banana leaves... The five men who were sent to look for Abazu returned to report that he could not be found”. (115)

This is a clear justification that Igbo traditional society valued right of life of every individual and the duty to protect its citizens from harm. Measures were taken to preserve the life of Onyekozuru while Abazu was hunted down to account for his actions.

Case II: Peaceful Co-Existence

Igbo traditional society imbibed the policy of peaceful co-existence amongst its neighbors and even strangers and was not known to provoke or attack.

“Let us write a letter to Kosiri and tell him what our people want. We should tell the strangers that we want peace, but not their meddling in our affairs”. (17)

Akachi’s chapter three aptly described this laudable humanitarian trait. She goes further to show that the Igbos have an innate right to preservation of their customs and tradition despite external influence while at the same time creating a harmonious environment for co-existence. They also believed in dialogue rather than confrontation and had guiding principles in all her proceedings.

Case III: Preservation Of Lives And Property



“Obufo met to continue discussion on the plan of action to defuse the tension caused by the ill-fated letter and to make adequate preparation to ensure the security of Umuga”. (108)

In times of war, the preservation of lives and property are the major concern of the consultative assembly. Their duty was to ensure that their decisions are in the best interest of the populace which guaranteed their safety and well being. This is captured in chapter nine of *The Last of the Strong Ones*.

Before they went to war they weighed the consequences of their actions as it affects the citizenry, a fundamental human right policy,

“Murmurs of approval and disapproval swelled and collided; Onyekozuru cleared her throat and spoke. She warned Obufo against taking a hasty action without proper planning or investigation”. (109)

“We shall not start a fight Okoroji cried but if the meddlers fire ten shots, we will reply with a hundred”. (110)

Traditional Igbo society has been one that placed much emphasis on human survival and always ensured that in whatever decision the Ndiechie took the right of the individual was always paramount.

Case IV- Domestic Dispute Resolution

The head of each family plays a very important role in maintaining peace and order in traditional Igbo society. Most times, his ability to settle or resolve disputes or pacify an aggrieved member of the family goes a long way in promoting the peace of the community.

A case in point is seen in chapter four of *The Last of the Strong Ones* where Ejimnaka in anger and retaliation to an offence committed by her neighbor and rival Ijeoma, orchestrated the kidnap and sale into domestic slavery of her six year old son.

Her husband, Obiatu upon observing her nonchalant attitude toward the sad news gently confronts her and she confesses her role in the scheme.

“Forgive me!... forgive him Obim I whispered ...Yes yes I forgive you...Ejim I love you for your faults as well as for you virtues... A few days later, Ubani returned to freedom from domestic captivity”. (31)

It can be observed that it was the diplomacy of Obiatu that remedied the situation, which in turn brought joy to the household of Ijeoma. This goes to show that the preservation of human life and resolution of conflict were a guiding force in everyday traditional Igbo society.

Comparative Analysis (*Things Fall Apart* and *The Last Of The Strong Ones*)



From the above survey, both novelists in their different styles of narration examined the intricacies of the traditional Igbo society as it relates to human right issues. Various instances and examples were used to portray rich culture, laws and traditions of the Igbo people.

It should, however, be pointed out that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* gives a more in-depth analysis and examination of various human right issues as it relates to both mundane and more complex occurrences. There is a sense in which Achebe's text explores a deeper understanding of the Igbo ethos coupled with its recognition as the first Nigerian novel suggests the authenticity of the source of the narrative especially considering its intention of contesting colonial perception of the Igbos.

Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* on the other hand narrows its narration to the Igbo traditional society in the periphery of colonialism. It also highlights the egalitarian nature of traditional Igbo society and the actual role played by consultative assembly in general affairs and more especially in interference with external influences. The role of women in traditional Igbo society is also beautifully elaborated.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Both novelists must be applauded in their attempts at re-enacting the Igbo traditional society in its beauty and uniqueness. They have succeeded immensely in proving beyond reasonable doubt that the Igbo traditional society and by extension, Africa had a rich cultural heritage and imbibed the principles of fairness and justice in every aspect of its existence before the advent of the colonial masters. They have also proven that human life and the preservation of life and right of the individual are guiding forces in its day to day administration in the dispensation of justice and human right policy.

The above case study from both novels have brought to light the great achievements and level of advancement and civilization of pre-colonial Igbo society and they can as such be used as references and examples to show case the supremacy and relevance of Igbo traditional system even in present day dispensation of justice and actualization of fundamental human rights policy as it affects life in general.

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