



## PROVERBIAL MATERIALS IN THE ORAL TRADITION OF THE IGBO: A STUDY OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S MAGNUM OPUS

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### **Abstract:**

This paper is an attempt to find proverbial materials in Achebe's magnum opus, to interpret and analyse them. The proverb is one of the elements of folklore which permeates the literary imagination of writers. It has for that matter been extant in verbal as well as written communication between people as it provides readers, users as well as listeners with the true essence of the culture of its originating society. Understandably, the proverb is one of the main discursive segments of oral tradition from which Chinua Achebe profusely draws to negate the colonial episteme. Since proverbs are part of the daily life of the Igbo people in which their culture is expressed, the novelist uses those not only as appropriate literary devices to depict social realities but also to help record the events of the past. Thus, Achebe's intent in using proverbs is to give to his creative impulse an accurate stamp of uniqueness, authenticity as well as identity. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is rich in proverbial materials in its endeavour to show that in non-literate oral cultures, proverbs, songs, poems as well as sayings are not the only fundamental repository of his people's epistemology but also act as an explanatory meta-narrative. The study is based on theoretical frameworks proposed by both Mieder (2004) and McLeod (2002). While the former states that the wisdom of proverbs has guided people in their social interactions with the cultural values it carries; the latter adopts a postcolonial stand by positing that proverbs are used to overturn the dominant ways of seeing the world and representing reality in ways which do not replicate colonialist values. This suggests on the part of the postcolonial literary theorist, a dexterous manipulation of the English language; its syntactical structure as well as its semantics to project his own culture, outlook, and worldviews. *Things Fall Apart* is a compelling example of such a paradigm. The findings show that proverbial materials constitute a multifunction form of folk literature premised on significant cultural linguistic products created and used in social situations for social purposes: didactic as well as a depository of culture.

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## 1. Introduction

In Africa today the issue of authenticity and of identity has become a significant subject matter in the study of literature, oral as well as written, because of its ability to depict imaginatively the beliefs, values, and cultural backgrounds of its originating society. In this sense, Marc Aronson (2007:31) is natural when he argues that history is getting to know the language, customs, and culture of a people and concludes that “fact checking” is crucial because it seems pretty easy to get history wrong. Generally, proverbs are symbolic expressions of people which are influenced, to a greater extent, by the linguistic and socio-cultural experiences and orientations of its originating community. Understandably, they have their roots in ancestral history and are powerful and effective tools of communication, as they exploit the resources of metaphor, hyperbole, similes, among other striking artistic forms in their articulations. The imagery in proverbs, their form and context of use as well as their aesthetics accurately reflect the peculiar natural environment of the user and in the process constitute an essential cultural heritage; which is passed down orally from one generation to another. Time has changed and it is observed that proverbs, just like other elements of folklores, are nowadays becoming a written document. Thus, proverbs enter into the realm of written literature because of the imaginative possibilities they are capable of evoking. Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist and essayist, uses Igbo proverbs to manifest the local culture of his people in the received Colonial English language. A proverb, of course, is a sentence or phrase which briefly and strikingly expresses some recognised truth or shrewd observation about practical life that has been preserved by oral tradition. Proverbs are generally accepted as truths ascertained through experience and they are dexterously marked by a peculiar epigrammatic and figurative turn in their expressions. Achebe’s use of proverbs in his fictional works and essays add African colour, freshness and flavour to his language and thereafter shows the wit and wisdom with which the Igbo man portray situations and acts when making a speech. In *Things Fall Apart*, the narrator in the opening pages of the novel eloquently says during a conversation that “*Among the Ibo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten*” (1994:7). In fact, the need for authenticity is emphasised by Simon Gikandi (1991: 39) who accurately calls Achebe’s fictional Umuofia a “*community in which mastery of figurative language is the core to social survival and control*”. In this sense, Chukwuma (1991:11) states that proverbs are incorporated into the characters’ flow of speech imbuing it with much vigorous, sense and style. As a matter of course, using the English language in his novels as a medium of expression and for that matter communication, enables Chinua Achebe to challenge overtly western cultural superiority and through this their so-called hegemonic or scientific language. Since the novel belongs to the European tradition, the novelist combines a new sort of narration, proverbs, old values and new ones which are brought

into the novel to reexplore African experiences and as well the history of their past which has facilitated the process of their unfortunate entanglement, dislocation and dispossession as well. The need for accuracy and authenticity is emphasized in this novel when some traditional African songs (poetry) try as much as possible to convey the Igbo's traditional folklore. Proverbs, or short sayings which are believed to convey some acquired wisdom, are legion in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. This epitomizes Igbo's constant use of proverbs to clarify an idea or to add local colour to their speech and thereafter provide an image of some universal truth which permeate the fact that the literary artist's tool is language; and s/he uses it to describe his character's appearances, actions, habits, inner feelings and thoughts as well. In this case, it is germane to say that the writer's style of writing determines, to a greater extent, the authenticity and acceptability of any literary work originating from Africa. As a matter of fact, it has also been observed that the effective manipulation of the colonial language in writing texts determines the proficiency of postcolonial writers. Chinua Achebe uses proverbs as a tool for delineating the attitudes, actions, inner feelings as well as thought patterns or processes of his traditional characters in *Things Fall Apart*, a novel intended for this study. The analysis is based on the theoretical framework proposed by postcolonial critical insights which state that proverbs in prose and poetry are analyzed in terms of their literary value and what they tell us about the writer and his times. This paper, therefore, thoroughly examines some selected relevant proverbs used in the literary texts, analyses and interprets them.

## **2. The Proverb: definition, use and purpose in the realm of literary studies**

### **2.1 "The Palm Oil with which Achebe's words are Eaten" (Bernth Linfords)**

From time immemorial, eloquent, fluent and persuasive speakers communicate their ideas vividly and tersely using proverbs. But the meaning of a proverb, to a greater extent, depends heavily on the circumstance of use, the dexterity of the user, and the iconic cultural and interpretative skills of the listener/user, among other linguistic tropes which effectively embody its aesthetic values. Proverbs contain everyday experiences and common observations in succinct and formulaic language, making them easy to remember and ready to be used instantly as effective rhetoric in oral or written communication. For Mieder (2004), "*The wisdom of proverbs has guided people in their social interactions for thousands of years throughout the world. This has been the case during preliterate times, and there are no signs that proverbs have outlived their usefulness in modern technological societies either. Occasional claims persist that proverbs are on their way to extinction in highly developed cultures; but proverbs that reflect the mores and situation of the present are constantly added to the proverbial repertoire*" (Mieder 2004: XI). While some proverbs have dropped out of use because their message or metaphor does not fit the times any longer, they are often associated, in the African context, with common or traditional wisdom or attitude and are highly prized in the traditional African society where they are used to portray certain actions or events in picturesque manners. Proverbs are richly flavoured, concise

(and sometimes meaningful) and fixed oral expressions that epitomize the essence of African cultures and, are for that matter, used to project cultural, social, as well as moral values and experiences.

In a germane article on "The Nature of the Proverb" (1932), published by Bartlett Jere Whiting (1904–1995), an American paremiologist, many definitions have been reviewed to suit many situations. In this, he summarizes his findings in a lengthy conglomerate version of his own:

*"A proverb is an expression which, owing its birth to the people, testifies to its origin in form and phrase. It expresses what is apparently a fundamental truth—that is, a truism,—in homely language, often adorned, however, with alliteration and rhyme. It is usually short, but need not be; it is usually true, but need not be. Some proverbs have both a literal and figurative meaning, either of which makes perfect sense; but more often they have but one of the two. A proverb must be venerable; it must bear the sign of antiquity, and, since such signs may be counterfeited by a clever literary man, it should be attested in different places at different times. This last requirement we must often waive in dealing with very early literature, where the material at our disposal is incomplete."* (Whiting 1932: 302; also in Whiting 1994: 80)

In the same line of thought, it has been argued that, "A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation" (Mieder 1985: 119; also, in Mieder 1993: 24). This summary definition mirrors that of Whiting (1932: 302; 1994: 80), while the short conglomerate version, "A proverb is a short sentence of wisdom" resembles the statement of one of the world's leading paremiologist of the twentieth century, Taylor's (1890–1973) as can be found in his magisterial volume on *The Proverb* (1931). In any case, most people in general, not bothered by academic concerns and intricacies, have a good idea of what a proverb encompasses.

The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2008) defines a proverb as a "short well-known statement that is generally true". As can be inferred from the on-going discussion, it is very important in literary studies to argue, certainly, that a proverb is one of the elements of *folklore*. Like many other elements of folklore, a proverb plays a significant role in the literary imaginations of writers from once colonised areas who chose to use it as a means to challenge and subvert the hegemonic power of the colonial language by inserting different strategies into their own language to give their creative impulses a stamp of uniqueness, authenticity, and of identity. In fact, in their endeavour, they reflect and project their culture, tradition, outlook, views and perceptions of a community that had shaped their imagination even though they communicate in a language alien to or given them. In fact, from Achebe's perspective, "proverbs obviously contain a lot of common sense, experience, wisdom, and truth, and as such they represent ready-made traditional strategies in oral speech acts and writings from high literature to the mass media"

(Hasan-Rokem 1990). In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe through the narrator of the novel exalts the use and purpose of proverbs when he says that “among the Igbos, proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten.” According to G. Adewole in his 2020 essay, “The Art of Conversation. Proverbs in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*”, “palm oil serves as a natural sauce for boiled yam, so are proverbs used in rendering oral speech among the Igbo”. In other words, he imagines and invents a situation where words are put in the mouth like pieces of yams and chewed, after dipping the yam (word) in palm oil. From time immemorial, skilled and eloquent public speakers communicate their ideas and ideals vividly and tersely with appropriate proverbs. Proverbs according to Akporobaro (2008) is a short popular saying usually in the form of moral advice or truth expressed in a concise form. He goes further to describe it as a means by which ideas could be vividly expressed and illustrated. Yisa K. Y. (1998) opines that a proverb is a short repeated witty statement of experience that is used to further a social end. In the light of these considerations, one may argue that proverbs are short, cleverly constructed brief statements used to perform special functions in society or as popular witty sayings with words of advice or warning. In this case, one is inclined to say that the effectiveness of a proverb lies largely in its brevity and directness since the syntax is simple, the images vivid, and sometimes very easy to understand. In some cases, memorability is aided through the use of alliteration, rhyme, and rhythm. In the African context, for instance, proverbs are viewed as a depository of native intelligence, code of moral laws and philosophy of both life and social justice (Crystal David 1995:184).

Scholars of oral tradition like Finnegan (2012), Okpewho (1992), Yankah (1989), and Agyekum (2016, 2005) have researched extensively into proverbs and have come out with the conclusion that proverbs are terse sayings that embody general truths or principles and ways of life-based on people’s past experiences, philosophy, perception, ideology, socio-cultural concepts and worldview. As a matter of fact, proverbs are used to foreground the values and shared beliefs of a speech or an oral community. Thus, the use of proverbs, in this context, is then acknowledged as a mark of one’s communicative competence in Igbo’s indigenous communication. For instance, if a native speaker has the ability to use suitably the proverb in the right socio-cultural contexts, it depicts his/her communicative competence and even versatility as well in the language and culture he is using. Agyekum (2005:9) opines that “proverbs are interpretations of traditional wisdom based on the experiences and socio-political life of our elders.” Chinua Achebe uses a series of proverbs in his fictional works to depict his competence in the Igbo language and his ability to appropriate the colonial literary enterprise as a weapon of active physical revolt and as textual indignation against colonial pathologies, mostly the ones that degrade and deny Africans humanity. The crafty ways by which the proverbs are aesthetically interwoven with some songs and tales delineate their communicative functions and thereafter identify the artist’s creativity. In fact, proverbs are often used as verbal strategies to stave off or to handle tense situations which stem from face-to-face communication in African societies. As we shall discuss this in the referent text, the use of multiple proverbs in a language not only concretises the value of language and culture

but it also belauds the expertise of the user/speaker to handle face-to-face communication as well as face-threatening acts in African societies in an effort to depict the politeness systems of the respective cultures.

Hussein (2005:61) has discussed the use of African proverbs and examined how many scholars of African literary works placed proverbs at a very higher level of communication. Ssetuba (2002:1) states that in Africa "*The proverb is regarded as a noble genre of African oral tradition that enjoys the prestige of a custodian of a people's wisdom and philosophy of life.*" Oluwole (1997:100) records that in Africa, "*proverbs are the analytic tools of thought*" as they portray the wits, wisdom, intellect, environment and the sociocultural and political experiences of the African and for that matter showcase its worldview, thought and philosophy. Finnegan (2012:380) showcases that "*imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs.*" To some extent, proverbs are wise sayings that address the heart of the discourse in any given context, truthfully and objectively. In Africa as well as in Nigerian cultures especially, proverbs convey meanings to the hearts of the listeners as they have a great influence on the lifestyles of many people, mainly through means of religion and culture as well. They share with the world the practical wisdom the people have learnt in their way of life. Therefore, the use of proverbs in Chinua Achebe's motivations as a post-colonial writer was his burning desire to validate African epistemology or local knowledge; *Things Fall Apart* (1958, 1974), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966), *No Longer at Ease* (1972), *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988) are texts being wholly dedicated to that end. His fictional works (and essays) are fraught with significant proverbs which accurately translate Igbo's traditional ethos, language, and institutions as well. In exploring the implications of the relationships of proverbs established by paremiologist in this paper, it makes sense to emphasise that the interrelationship of proverbs with other verbal folklore genres has been of great interest to African writers as well. Thus, Chinua Achebe's dexterity in the use of oral elements lies in his ability to manipulate their application to suit the manifold different social, cultural and political contexts portrayed in his novels. In the view of Wunderlich (1972, cited in Norrick, 1985), proverbs allow the speakers to disguise their true feelings, to leave themselves an escape route to offer their hearers choices and as well to indicate real or imagined consensus. Through the use of proverbs in his works, Achebe tries to review the past, examine the present and thereafter assess the future.

From the different views and opinions on the proverb(s) discussed so far, it makes sense to argue that the proverb(s) is a kernel that contains wisdom and the philosophy of the traditional people and, at best, moral expositions often shrink to a few words to boost its didactic or repository nature. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, proverbs are mainly used by the novelist to suit every situation and occasion in the plot thematic postulations of the novel. This is so because the utterance of every significant affirmation of traditional value or belief is thoroughly strengthened and as well supported with the adequate use of appropriate proverbs. In some cases, social problems and personal difficulties are settled by a constant appeal to relevant sanctioning proverbs as part of

coercive measures inherent in the society. All the proverbs used in African literary works, for the study do not occur simply by accident; rather, they are incorporated to play a significant role in the novels. Finally, the use of proverbs in communication, oral or written, enables the speaker/user “to avoid personal commitment and refutation as well” (Taylor, 1962, cited in Basgoz, 1993).

This paper discusses some proverbs used by Chinua Achebe in his novel, *Things Fall Apart*. The aim is to sort out some relevant proverbs, highlight their roles, importance and significance in the overall bearing of the novel. It will also showcase how the proverb serves as an important tool of story-telling in the re-creation of a genuine and believable African side of the story.

### 3. Proverbs in Chinua Achebe's magnum opus

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1974) discusses the use of proverbs among his people. In this novel, considered to be his magnum opus, he profusely uses Igbo proverbs as an essential element in his writing in an attempt to show that they are not only highly prized in traditional African societies but are also used to portray certain actions or events in picturesque manners. In an essay, Bernth Lindfors also discusses the significant functions of the use of proverbs in Achebe's novels. For him, Achebe makes use of proverbs to provide a grammar of values by which the deeds of his characters can be measured; to serve firstly as thematic statements which remind us of some of the significant motifs in the novel namely the importance of status, the value of achievement, and the idea of man as a shaper of his own destiny and secondly; to add new touches of local colour and to sound and reiterate themes; and finally, to comment on or to warn against foolish and unworthy deeds, actions and behaviours (Nnolim & Emenyonu, 2014:120)

In the fictional Umuofia, a cluster of nine villages on the lower Niger populated mostly by the Igbo people, a proverb is used very often in conversation to help people understand things better by presenting the truth and can as well give advice. Certainly, proverbs satisfy the demand for conciseness and simplicity as well, but even more significantly, they inspire trustworthiness by awakening positive traditional feelings in the addressee. All proverbs contain apparent truths and as well have graphic qualities with which they are used to “spice speech”. Finnegan (1997: 393) affirms that a proverb is “...a saying in a more or less fixed form marked by shortness, sense and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it.” In proverbs, many abstract ideas, values, and emotions are represented by certain emblems. Indeed, a user of proverbs has the arduous task of ensuring that his usage is appropriate and suitable for the occasion on which he is using it. The orators/artists, or audiences/listeners, at different levels, make use of everyday occurrences and images found in their immediate environments to emblemize as well as express the life that is peculiarly their own. Proverbs used in this case have an important impact on their storyline. In fact, all the proverbs found in *Things Fall Apart*, have, behind them, some kind of deeper meaning of Nigerian culture in general and Igbo in particular. The proverb concerns with and is used by people of all

ages and social statures to inform or remind others about the quintessence of social norms. People in the Igbo tribe of Nigeria use, for instance, proverbs in their everyday life as they are considered part and parcel of their culture and traditions where the art of conversation is revered for their guidance to pious conduct throughout the clan. An oral culture society as the one depicted by the novelist is one in which there is neither the knowledge of writing nor the possibility of writing. Achebe's fictional village of Umuofia is entirely dependent on memory and conversation of the old for the storing, transmission of information as well as sustenance of societal institutions. In this type of society, formulas in thought patterns and expressions were essential linguistic elements to oral people for the eventual mental imprinting of information in memory as well as the constant repetition of knowledge to others. Orality or oral tradition was the first form of communication between human beings. In his fictional works, Chinua Achebe uses proverbs as literary devices to fight against "otherness" in communication. The "other", in this context, is considered by postcolonial writers as a 'threat' that has been the major preoccupation of Western hegemonic thought. As a matter of fact, postcolonial writers like Achebe, Ngugi, Okara to mention just a few, have refused to keep quiet, and have for that matter, resolved to speak and write back, thus disrupting the realm of Western thought and bringing its language under the influence of a vernacular tongue and its complex speech habits (Aschroft et al. 2002: 39). For Chinua Achebe (1975: 61), "*the price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use*". The usufruct of its submissiveness is that the new English created by the post-colonial writer becomes, irredeemably different from the language at the colonial centre. In some instances, the use of *untranslated words* and *glossing* is part and parcel of the abundant strategies used to abrogate and appropriate the colonizer's language and thereafter reflect the cultural sensibilities of the non-Coloniser's own societies. However, such words are left un-glossed with an appropriate context to enable the reader to grab their meaning. In postcolonial texts, such as *Things Fall Apart*, this political act of leaving the words un-translated and many other strategies indicate that the text is written in an "other" language which eventually generates an 'inter-culture'. Further on, a blend of local language syntax with the lexical forms of English is also a frequent strategy in postcolonial discourse. In essence, the sense of cultural distinctiveness is found in Achebe's critique since he suggests that proverbs are, most often, used as a literary device with significant or distinctive effects. In some cases, they first of all, help to delineate characters' traits; secondly, to clarify some abstract issues which are not overtly stated and lastly, to spice or enrich the process of conversation or exchange between two or more characters in the novel. An instance of this is clearly stated when Okonkwo, the protagonist of Achebe's novel, went to Nwakibie to beg for seed yams to start his own business. It is worth recalling that Nwakibie was a "*wealthy man who had three huge barns [of yam], nine wives and thirty children*" (18): a remarkable achievement in the oral culture! In presenting kola nut and palm wine as customs demand to Nwakibie, Okonkwo said using many proverbial materials: "*Nna ayi...I have brought you this little kola. As our people say, "a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness". I have come to pay*



*you my respects and also ask for a favour.*" (19). This statement indicates Okonkwo's recognition of Nwakibie as a great man of the clan and shows at the same time his burning desire to emulate him; but with deep respect to his present social status. This proverb means that if a person is respectful, he will also be respected. It has the same meaning as the golden rule: 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you. For instance, by being respectful and very kind to others; you are surely setting yourself up for a life in which you will be well-respected. Although these are not overtly stated, the reader can infer from Okonkwo's reverence to Nwakibie and his personal ambition from the following proverb. While praying in the process, Nwakibie responds: "*We shall all live. We pray for life, children, good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me*". "*Let the kite perch and let the egret perch too*" (19). *If one says no to another, let its wing break*". Here, Nwakibie is praying for good things for both of them: the lender and the borrower. This proverb suggests that the sky is wide enough to accommodate all sorts of birds, both weak and strong, and adds in the process that anyone who says the other should not perch or rest, shall be incapacitated. In Igbo cosmology, the image of the "kite" and the "egret" symbolizes the strong and the weak as well as the rich and the poor in society. In the same line of thought, the allusion to 'no' is the spirit of jealousy and of oppression inherent in humans. This brings to mind the popular saying that "*whosoever digs a pit of death for his fellow man shall die in it*" (19).

Achebe endows Nwakibie with the belief in the spirit of communal living where every citizen has the freedom to aspire to any position in the society. Thus, anybody who does not want the progress of his kinsman is regarded as an evil being who has to be dealt with disdain and hostility. The underpinning of Nwakibie's prayer is up to the standard of society. Still discussing in Nwakibie's *obi*, Ogbuefi Idigbo, another elder, raises the issue of Obiako, the palm wine tapper's sudden death. Wiping the foam of wine from his moustache with the back of his hand, he said, "*There must be something wrong with it... There must be a reason for it*". A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing. The proverb relating to the "toad" shows that Obiako's death is not natural but is caused by some supernatural forces which are beyond control. In clear terms, this properly aligns with the maxim that, 'there must be something wrong with his untimely death; a reason for it'. Describing Obiako as a strange man, Nwakibie says that at one time, Obiako had gone to consult the oracle who told him that his dead father wanted him to sacrifice a goat for him. In response, Obiako had said to the diviner: "*ask my father if he ever had a fowl while he was alive*". Everybody laughed heartily except Okonkwo who laughed uneasily; because as the saying goes, "*an old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned*" (21). This proverb shows the extent to which Okonkwo is uncomfortable for he remembered his own father, Unoka's fredaines or escapades. This proverb invites readers to see Obiako's and Okonkwo's father as "*birds of the same feathers*". Unoka, Okonkwo's father, was not only a loafer but was also a poor lazy man who miserably died and was buried in the evil forest. He was not better than Obiako's father either. Therefore, there is no room for Okonkwo to laugh heartily over the abject poverty of another man's father. This is carefully designed by the novelist to be expressed by means of appropriate

proverbs. In the process, Okonkwo discloses the ultimate purpose of his visit using relevant proverbs and Nwakibie also answers using proverbs: *"I have come to you for help"*, he said. *"Perhaps you can already guess what it is. I have cleared a farm but has no yams to sow. I know what it is to ask a man to trust another with his yams, especially these days when young men are afraid of work. I am not afraid of hard work... "The lizard that jumped from the high Iroko tree to the ground said that he would praise himself if no one else did"* (21). *I began to fend for myself at an early age when most people still suck at their mothers' breasts. If you give me some yam seeds, I shall not fail you."*

Clearing his throat, Nwakibie says, *"It pleases me to see a young man like you these days when our youth have gone so soft. Many young men come to me to ask for yams but I have refused because I knew they would just dump them in the earth and leave them to be choked by weeds"*. When I say no to them, they think I am hard-heathered. But it is not so. *"Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching"* (21). *"I have learnt to be stingy with my yams. But I can trust you. I know it as I look at you. As our fathers said, you can tell a ripe corn by its look. I shall give you twice four hundred yams. Go and prepare your farm"* (22). This delineates a typical oral expression. Ong (2002: 26) states that in oral cultures like the one depicted by the novelist, *"oral formulaic thought and expression ride deep in consciousness and the unconscious; they do not vanish as soon as one used to them takes pen in hand. Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche"* (Ong 14) of people. According to Alimi (2012), proverbial materials are highly regarded in African traditional societies because they are used to portray certain actions or events in a picturesque manner. They make events come alive and vivid to the listener. In addition, proverbs are used as a means of transmitting the code of conduct, sense of humour and wisdom of people from one generation to another. *"Although it is found in all cultures, the narrative is in certain ways more functional in primary oral cultures. First, in primary oral cultures, as Havelock has pointed out"* (1978a; cf. 1963), knowledge cannot be managed in elaborate, more or less scientifically abstract categories, and so they cannot generate such human action to store, organise and communicate much of what they know (Ong 138). The narrative is particularly important in primary oral cultures because it binds, most often, a great deal of lore in relatively substantial, lengthy forms that are durable within an oral repetition. In this case, maxims, riddles, and proverbs are of course also durable but are usually brief.

To Achebe, proverbs constitute a precious narrative device that combines the effectiveness of their communicative power and the cultural density of his Igbo people so as to 'produce new modes of representation in countering colonial canonical texts' and to show that postcolonial discourse is crystallised by and replete with 'abrogation' and 'appropriation' in the canon of postcolonial studies. This suggests that writers in once colonised spaces ought to use linguistic structures of the colonial borrowed language, manipulate its syntactical structure as well as its semantics in order to prove stance against the colonizer. *Things Fall Apart* has at least 29 proverbs that represent, to a greater extent, the whole cultural system of values and beliefs of Igbo cultures. The widespread

use of proverbs so as to explain, or justify the social regulation within the socio-cultural group of Igbo people are a demonstration of their belief in situational morality. Using proverbs as regulatory devices for social interactions is typical of oral societies with no written tradition.

"Proverbs", writes Achebe, "are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (7). As was discussed earlier on, a proverb shows how important proverbs are in everyday life. As a matter of fact, "proverbs are literally disseminated throughout *Things Fall Apart*, as an effective verbal form of expression which helps to contextualize and thereafter explain events or situations." Here, it serves as a characteristic or is part of a concept that identifies the entire concept or related concept. In this sense, a proverb stands out as a significant metonymical presence of Igbo's culture in its effort to challenge and to subvert the supreme power of the colonial language to suit socio-cultural contexts. This is uttered by the narrator when Okoye visits Unoka, Okonkwo's father, to collect a debt he owns him.

*"Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten. Okoye was a great talker and he spoke for a long time, striking round the subject and then hitting it finally. In short, he was asking Unoka to return the two thousand cowries he had borrowed from him more than two years before"* (7) [emphasis mine]

From the above exchange between Okoye and Unoka, proverbs clearly, perform the function of culture carrier in the text. *Things Fall Apart* is rich in proverbial language, and this characteristic makes Achebe's text culturally dense and more ethnographic. In a non-literate oral culture, cooperation and collectivism go hand in hand and every individual may help his kinsman when he is in need. In Achebe's oral cultures where knowledge of a cultural and social group is not transmitted in a written form, memory plays a vital role and the proverb acts as an essential and unique mnemonic device for storytellers who use it as a didactic and repository tools. Hence, proverbs as well as sayings, as has been discussed so far in this paper, enable the writer to introduce essential aspects of Igbo epistemology and philosophy which function, most often, as a particular form of explanatory meta-narrative which is imbued with educational values and acts effectively as a fundamental repository of wisdom, knowledge and experiences. Proverbs are the repository of African cultural values viz...their knowledge, justice, beliefs and wisdom. Thus, it is through proverbs that Igbo complex concepts, such as that of *chi*, are explained by the narrator:

*"At an early age he had achieved fame as the greatest wrestler in all the land. That was not luck. At the most one could say that his chi or personal god was good. But 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."* (27)

The following proverb denotes the intention of the elders' disapproval when Okonkwo grossly insults a less fortunate kinsman—with no titles—who contradicts him at a meeting by saying that the meeting they were attending *"is for men"* (26). The old men bore no ill will towards Okonkwo but told him in a proverbial formula that, *"Those whose palm kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble."* (26). The eldest brother of Obierika acknowledges Maduka for taking after his father in the following proverb. *"When mother cow is chewing grass, its young ones watch its mouth"* (70-71). Maduka, as mentioned previously, is the son of Okonkwo's closest friend, Obierika. He is presented to the reader as a man of sturdy force and a manly guy; a very strong, an athletic young man, who wins easily and rapidly all the contested wrestling matches with such skill that even Okonkwo, who was a great wrestler, is very impressed by his achievements. He is presented to the reader as every father's dream child; in Okonkwo's eyes. Unlike Okonkwo's family, neither him nor his sibling follows the step of each other. The proverb is uttered to show Okonkwo's condemnation of Nwoye's effeminate attitude: *"A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches."* (66). Other proverbs in the novel and their interpretations are discussed below: *"When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk."* (10) This proverb reveals the importance of the moon to the rural dwellers. The proverb, *"Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel down"* (7-8) is used to depict the importance of status and value of achievement, in the traditional setting of Igbo community. Proverbs are used at crucial moments in the lives of the characters in *Things Fall Apart*. For instance, at a previous meeting of the Umuofia community, Okika punctuates his speech with many proverbs; one of the proverbs is *"wherever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life."* (203). This proverb is used to enlighten the reader on the purpose of the meeting, the burning issue for which they have summoned the meeting. For instance, at the last meeting of the Umuofia community, Okika punctuates his speech with many proverbs; one of the proverbs is *"wherever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something if after its life."* This proverb is used to enlighten the reader on the purpose of the meeting, the burning issue for which they have summoned the meeting. Because of these efforts we now know a great deal about proverbs as a cultural resource, their functionality and the protocols for their usage, but also their artistry structure, wordplay, imagery, and so forth, especially after calls or appeals such as Isidore Okpewho's (1992) that scholars pay due attention to the aesthetic dimensions of traditional oral forms. Using proverbs in a discussion is an entertaining way to narrate your point. They can also give a greater potency to any message you are trying to convey. Proverbs were and still are important in traditional societies because they are relevant in a number of societal proceedings and are considered part and parcel of traditional texts used by creative writers to get their message across.

Language is crucial in the production and reproduction of societal improvements and constitutes a powerful means by which society regulates and organizes itself, reproduces its past, present and future; constructs power in an effort to install identity.

In other words, oral language “*was the means by which Africa made its existence, its history long before the colonial and imperial presence of the west manifested itself*”. This suggests Achebe’s unobtrusive use of English to reflect the African environment and integrate character and incident through the use of imagery drawn from traditional sources, a technique so consistent in its application that it can be demonstrated in passages taken from any part of the novel. The reference to proverbs in the second part of the novel is important since “*Achebe incorporates much proverbial material couched in traditional formulae with a sense of exact appropriateness*” (Killam 1969: 18). The crucial function of language as a medium of power holds that post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. Ashcroft et al (1989) explain that the cultural, linguistic and textual process of the indigenization of the language of the centre enacted by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* aims at the seizure of the Coloniser’s language and the Western literary canon so as to create a new consciousness and a new cultural and literary identity. In this context, the proverb is used as the metonymy which touches the very soul of the colonial linguistic and textual structures to such an extent that it ultimately changes their natures; the abrogation and appropriation of the foreign dominant language means “othering” it, signing it with the trace of difference. This strategic and subversive appropriation of the English language and canon finally makes it possible for Achebe’s language to be found out of the gaze of the (colonialist) other; but rather, in the hybrid space of the in-betweenness and subsequently serve a postcolonial purpose. The path towards the (re)construction of a new postcolonial identity lies in the acceptance of the syncretic nature of cultures, the abandon of the illusionary retrieval of some sort of original, pure, precolonial culture, and in the re-appropriation of a lost voice – which finally obtained new instruments to tell its own story. Achebe’s appropriation of the colonizer’s linguistic code, the English language, and its subsequent manipulation is conscious of stylistic and political choices. Their subversive effects lie in the dislocation of the English language from the centre to the margin, in order not only to disprove and dismantle colonial discourse and colonial hegemony of representation but also to give voice to the unheard and neglected other.

In the third chapter of the novel, Achebe carefully describes Okonkwo’s visit to Nwakibie, a wealthy man of the village to seek help. In the following lines, the novelist clearly displays the dramatic function of proverbial materials. As a matter of fact, it is essential to specify that proverbs are not to be considered as mere pleonastic cultural embellishments. Folktales are another narrative device extensively used by Achebe, especially in *Things Fall Apart*, a novel characterized by the traditional and mythical milieu of pre-colonial Africa. Along with proverbs, tales are important repositories of knowledge, experiences and wisdom which are essential for the economy of the narration.

Uchendu’s maxim about the men of Abame who killed a white man because they did not understand his words is clearly illustrated by means of a folktale embedded with proverbs. This example demonstrates the powerfulness and significance of folktales as part of an oral tradition in Igbo traditional culture. In essence, they help the people to

remember their past histories and achievements and function as the collective memory of a given socio-cultural group and for that matter, constitute significant educational tools for the younger generations. Thus, in Chapter Fifteen of the novel, during a discussion between Okonkwo, Obierika and Uchendu about the first sightings of white men, Uchendu resorts to a folktale in order to explain his point of view on the massacre of the people of Abame. Thus, he says, "*Never kill a man who says nothing*" (140). Those men of Abame were fools. What did they know about the man?" He ground his teeth again and told a story to illustrate his point. "*Mother Kite once sent her daughter to bring food. She went, and brought back a duckling. "You have done very well," said Mother Kite to her daughter, "but tell me, what did the mother of this duckling say when you swooped and carried its child away?" "It said nothing", replied the young kite. "It just walked away." "You must return the duckling," said Mother Kite. "There is something ominous behind the silence." And so, Daughter Kite returned the duckling and took a chick instead. "What did the mother of this chick do?" asked the old kite. "It cried and raved and cursed me," said the young kite. "Then we can eat the chick," said her mother. "There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts." Those men of Abame were fools".*" (140). Uchendu's story of the Mother Kite and the duckling reiterates through digression that generally "*there is something ominous behind silence*" and that "*there is nothing to fear from someone who shouts*". Thus, any man who says nothing, Uchendu insists, must not be killed or harmed because he is not yet an aggressor. Proverbs fulfil wo/man's need to summarise experiences as well as observations into nuggets of truth and wisdom that project decent living conditions. Every culture has its own proverbial materials that embody the philosophical and epistemological constructs of its own people in communication as far as the social, political, religious and economic constraints are concerned.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has attempted to show that Chinua Achebe's novels are indictments of African orality and has critically examined the extent to which the novelist has appropriated both Western canon and its techniques to portray the pre-colonial Umuofians endowed with viable systematic social, cultural, educational, administrative and judiciary arrangements. The examination has shown that the society of *Things Fall Apart* is purely an oral one where people regarded the "word" as sacred because its utterance bore utmost significance. The setting of *Things Fall Apart* is an agrarian community that provides Achebe with the opportunity to incorporate proverbs, myths, and folktales into the narrative. Proverbs have been literally disseminated throughout the narration as they are an effective verbal form of expression. Their use helps in the contextualization and explanation of events or situations and serves for that matter as an important metonym of Igbo culture delineating the crucial issue of appropriating and abrogating western tradition texts. In Achebe's fictional works and essays, the proverb and many other idiomatic expressions used work as vessels of orthodox moral codes of conduct and of wisdom.

Proverbs, as we have discussed, work as didactic statements reflecting social guidelines, and as vehicles of collective thoughts, beliefs, and cultural values of their originating society. In fact, Achebe's proverbs reflect his people's culture, folklore, and societal norms which he weaves with other words to write freely and skillfully the story of his people from his own perspective. These relationships show the canvas on which his novels, mostly, *Things Fall Apart* is set. The results of this study show that *Things Fall Apart* has at least 29 proverbs, representing the whole cultural system of values and beliefs of Igbo cultures. Achebe's proverbs are the repository of African cultural values, especially their knowledge, justice, beliefs and wisdom and as well help, in many respects, to dispel the belief that a people is barbaric and uneducated for there is often a stigma surrounding a people who cannot speak English; not educated in western formal education. The translation of these proverbs makes it quite possible and easy to see the intelligence and life experience the people of Africa possessed. The study confirms that society and its way of life are not superior to that of another society and admits that the path towards the (re)construction of a new postcolonial identity lies in the acceptance of the syncretic nature of cultures, the abandonment of the illusionary retrieval of some sort of original, pure pre-colonial culture, and in the urgent re-appropriation of a lost voice; which will finally help obtain the necessary instruments and/or materials to tell its own story. Achebe's appropriation of the colonizer's linguistic code, the English language, and its subsequent manipulation and moulding are conscious stylistic and political choices.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

This manuscript has not been submitted to any other journal for review and publishing. The author has no affiliation with any organization with a direct financial interest in the subject matter discussed in the manuscript.

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Bawa Kammampool  
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