Oral Tradition and Its Influence on African Literature: A Study of Things Fall Apart

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***Abstract*—Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart represents a pivotal moment in African literature, as it captures the pre-colonial Igbo society with great emphasis on the employment of oral traditions within written texts. This paper treats the manner in which Achebe uses orature, such as proverbs, folktales, myths, and storytelling, to safeguard indigenous knowledge, to give structure to the novel, and to subvert colonial narratives. Through the discussion of prominent examples, such as how proverbs are strategically used in dialogue or how folktales like "The Birds and the Tortoise" become allegories, the paper establishes how oral tradition informs the thematic concern of cultural identity, change, and resistance in the novel. The paper, in addition, foregrounds Achebe's hybrid narrative techniques that mediate between Igbo oral aesthetics and Western literary traditions, generating a counter-discourse against Eurocentric representations of Africa. In the end, this study stresses the political and artistic significance of oral tradition within African literature that will keep being attractive into the future.**

***Keywords*—Oral tradition, African literature, Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, Proverbs, Folktales, Colonialism, Igbo culture.**

I. INTRODUCTION

African literature stands on a paradoxically very oral tradition of history, culture, and communal value that span generations. Before unfamiliar scripts were provided, African societies relied on stories, proverbs, myths, and songs as carriers of knowledge, of moral lessons, and of collective remembrance (Okpewho 4). The African transition from oral to written literature was not just a change in media but a reclamation of narrative power against the colonial attempts to damn the continent as primitive and without a history (Said 21). The tradition-challenging and cultural-asserting production of Chinua Achebe in Things Fall Apart (1958) is of paramount significance, so much so that Igbo oral aesthetics are masterfully integrated into a written novel to contest the Eurocentric depiction of African culture.

Its importance lies in how effectively it assumes the speech of pre-colonial Igbo society, where oral tradition was used as the chief agency of education, governance, and social cohesion. Achebe himself states, "the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Things Fall Apart 7). The statement highlights the centrality of orature to African communication where - far from being mere figurative language - proverbs and folk narratives are actual instruments of imparting wisdom and oratorical strength. Prominent writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o state that oral literature is the "oldest and richest" form of African expression (Decolonising the Mind 14). Achebe's work pictures that richness by embedding Igbo oral forms into the structure of the novel.

One of the main ways Things Fall Apart incorporates oral tradition is through extensive use of proverbs. In the Igbo culture, proverbs denote concentrated wisdom and serve to instruct social behavior and community value systems. Achebe uses proverbs in character development, hinting at the plot, and giving symbolic meaning. For example, "If a child washes his hands, he could eat with kings" (Things Fall Apart 8) describes Okonkwo's journey from relative obscurity to eminence, emphasizing that through an application of personal effort one can defeat the circumstance of social or economic disenfranchisement (8). The other saying, "A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing" (67), predicts the turmoil caused by colonialism: it signifies the unstoppable demise of traditional Igbo society. These proverbs shape the moral and philosophical framework of the novel rather than being melodious adornments. In addition to proverbs, Achebe utilizes folktales and myths to uphold the culture and to testify to the historical consciousness. The "Birds and the Tortoise" story acts as a parallel to Okonkwo's tragic life stages of rise to power, exile, and falling from the very pinnacle he attained-a parallel to the tortoise's pride and punishment (Obiechina 45). The

allegory thus serves two purposes: it entertains, as well as sanctions a very gentle criticism of social and political reality. Another significant tale is the Abame story, which stands as the warning of the "silent danger" of colonialism, cautioning the world against underestimating external threats and serving as encapsulation for the novel's wider indictment of imperialist encroachment (Achebe 102). Through such narratives, Achebe illustrates how oral tradition is used on the one hand as a means of preserving culture and on the other as a form of resistance literature.

The technique used by Achebe also situates and intensifies the tension between oral and written discourse, a theme very much at the center of postcolonial African literature. He resists this colonial degradation of African orality by marrying the Igbo oral forms with the Western novelistic tradition. African writers such as Joseph Conrad (Heart of Darkness) had portrayed Africa as a "dark continent" that lacked any history (Conrad 11), but this whole discounting attitude is undermined by Achebe through representing a sophisticated Igbo civilization replete with complex governance, religion, and art systems. By means of untranslated Igbo words, proverbs, and oral narratives, he asserts a linguistic freedom alongside cultural freedom, both of which resist colonial-language hegemony (Ashcroft et al. 38).

In the context of oral tradition, the book also connects the issues of cultural erosion, colonial violence, and the resilience of indigenous knowledge. The character of Okonkwo, for instance, commits suicide, symbolizing the collapse of traditional structures under colonial pressure; meanwhile, the continuous presence of oral narratives in the novel stands for the survival of culture. To quote Emmanuel Obiechina, "the story outlives the warrior" (53), suggesting that while individual men may perish, the shared memory sustained through orature nevertheless survives. This tension between destruction and continuity is central to Things Fall Apart; therefore, it is not simply a story of one man’s tragedy but a reflection upon cultural survival.

This inquiry aims at how Achebe used oral tradition in Things Fall Apart to serve different functions: it works as a narrative medium, cultural archive, and tool of resistance. Through an analysis of proverbs, folktales, and storytelling techniques, it is shown how oral literature shapes the themes, characters, and political messages of the novel. It also situates the work of Achebe within larger debates of post-colonial literature, especially with the reclamation of indigenous narrative mechanisms against colonial historiography. Essentially, Things Fall Apart stands as a testament to African literature drawing from oral tradition to assert identity, record history, and resist erasure- a legacy that wields influence on modern African literature even today.

The Significance of Oral Tradition in African Culture
Definition and Forms of Oral Tradition
Oral tradition or orature is an umbrella term for the enormous body of centuries-old spoken artistic expressions in African cultures (Ngũgĩ, Decolonising the Mind 9). Unlike literature, performance theater is central to orature; it depends on memory, collective participation, and rhythmic structures to keep the life of a text intact. Different orature forms include:

1. Proverbs (Ilù in Yoruba, Ilu in Igbo): Short metaphoric utterances that express wisdom, societal norms, or philosophic truths; as Achebe states in Things Fall Apart, proverbs are "the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe 7), meaning they make communication flow and give reinforcement to authority in discourse.
2. Folktales (Alo in Yoruba, Ifo in Igbo): Stories for entertainment with moral lessons, usually involving animals, spirits, and humans. The tortoise-(Mbe in Igbo folklore)-is a well-used trickster whose exploits impart lessons on cleverness, consequences, and societal values.
3. Myths: Sacred stories that explain cosmogony, natural phenomena, and cultural practices; for example, many African tribes maintain creation myths to explain the rise of humanity through divine forces, such as the Yoruba through Oduduwa or the Igbo through Chukwu.
4. Songs and Poetry (Ewi, Oriki, Ijala): Musico-poetic arts and expressions used in rituals, ceremonies, or as compensations for arduous labor. Griots and praise-singers use rhythmic poetry to compose histories about their people, heroes, and societal topics.
5. Riddles and Puzzles: Verbal games interactively developed to revive their wit and linguistic dexterity. They play a vital

role in teaching children critical thinking during social occasions.

6. Legends and Epic Narratives: Semi-historical accounts of heroes, wars, and migrations like the Epic of Sundiata from Mali, which maintains the memory of the 13th-century ruler Sundiata Keita.

The mode is not static; it metamorphoses in newer contexts while stressing the primacy of the cultural element. As Ruth Finnegan states in Oral Literature in Africa: "Oral art is living art, continually recreated in performance" (17).

Role of Oral Literature in Preserving History, Morals, and Communal Identity

Over time, before there were written documents, oral traditions were mainly considered the historical documentation. Griots (Jeli in Mandinka culture) were to memorize genealogies, treaties, and kingly deeds. The vulnerability and value of oral historiography were stressed by scholar Amadou Hampâté Bâ when he lucidly stated: "*In Africa, when an old man dies, a library burns to the ground*" (Bâ 1). The Kano Chronicle, transmitted orally for centuries before its eventual transcription in the 19th century, recounts the rise of the Hausa city-states. On a similar note, Igbo Uli body art and mbari murals are historical and spiritual records, exemplifying the intersection of oral and visual traditions. Oral literature functions as a pedagogical tool, embedding ethical codes in memorable narratives. Folktales like *"The Hare and the Hyena"* (common across East Africa) teach the consequences of greed, while Akan Ananse spider stories from Ghana emphasize cleverness and accountability.

Proverbs, in particular, distill complex morals into pithy statements. The Igbo proverb *"A man who does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot say where he dried his body"* (Achebe 125) underscores the importance of self-awareness and historical consciousness. Such sayings are cited in village courts, elders' councils, and parenting, reinforcing communal values.

Oral traditions bind communities together through shared stories, rituals, and performances. The *Dipo* initiation rites of the Krobo people in Ghana use songs and dances to transition girls into womanhood, while the *Xhosa intonjane* ceremony employs oral poetry to instill cultural pride. During festivals like the Yoruba *Odun Egungun* (Festival of Ancestors), masked performers channel ancestral spirits through chants and drumming, reaffirming the living's connection to the dead. These practices resist cultural erasure, especially in diasporic communities where oral traditions anchor displaced identities.

Defense of Orality

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a foremost advocate for African linguistic and cultural sovereignty, argues in *Decolonising the Mind* that colonialism sought to suppress oral traditions to undermine African self-perception:

"Language carries culture, and culture carries the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (Ngũgĩ 16).

He critiques Eurocentric education systems that devalue oral narratives as "primitive," urging African writers to center indigenous storytelling forms. Achebe heeds this call in *Things Fall Apart* by structuring the novel like an oral tale—beginning *in medias res*, employing repetition, and integrating communal voices. Other scholars, such as Isidore Okpewho (African Oral Literature), highlight orature's adaptability, demonstrating how modern African writers like Wole Soyinka and Bessie Head reinterpret oral motifs in their written fiction. Meanwhile, Karin Barber (*The Anthropology of Texts*) examines how contemporary digital media (radio dramas, hip-hop) extend oral traditions into new mediums.

Proverbs as a Narrative and Cultural Tool in *Things Fall Apart*

In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, proverbs are not merely decorative sayings but fundamental instruments of communication, wisdom, and cultural preservation. The Igbo people, like many African societies, place immense value on proverbial language, viewing it as essential to meaningful discourse. Achebe himself underscores this when he writes, *"Among the Igbo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten"* (Achebe 7). This metaphor—comparing proverbs to palm oil, a staple in Igbo cuisine—illustrates how proverbs enrich dialogue, making it smoother, more persuasive, and deeply rooted in tradition.

Proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* serve multiple functions:

Character Development – They reveal the personalities, values, and flaws of key figures like Okonkwo and Unoka.

Cultural Transmission – They encode Igbo philosophy, social norms, and collective wisdom.
Foreshadowing – They subtly hint at future events, particularly the collapse of Umuofia under colonial rule.
Key Proverbs and Their Interpretations
1. "A Child Who Washes His Hands Eats with Kings"
This proverb appears early in the novel, describing Okonkwo's rise from poverty to prominence:
"Okonkwo was cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams… He had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. That was years ago, before the white man came. Now he was a man of title, one of the lords of the clan." (Achebe 8)
Analysis:
The proverb reflects Okonkwo's self-made success, contrasting him with his father, Unoka, who died in disgrace. It reinforces the Igbo belief in meritocracy—hard work, not lineage, determines one's status. Ironically, Okonkwo's rise is followed by his tragic fall, suggesting that even the most diligent cannot withstand colonial disruption.
2. "A Toad Does Not Run in the Daylight for Nothing"
This proverb is used twice in the novel, each time signaling impending danger:
"Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, know that something is after its life." (Achebe 20)
Analysis:
A man named Obiako abandons palm-wine tapping, an unusual act that sparks speculation. The villagers' sense something is amiss, foreshadowing the arrival of missionaries and the erosion of traditions. The proverb reappears when the white men arrive in Umuofia. The "toad" symbolizes the Igbo people, and the unseen predator is colonialism. The proverb warns that drastic changes (like abandoning traditions) signal existential threats.
3. "An Old Woman Is Always Uneasy When Dry Bones Are Mentioned in a Proverb"
This saying reflects Okonkwo's deep-seated fear of weakness, inherited from his father's failures:
"Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father." (Achebe 13)
Analysis:
The proverb mirrors Okonkwo's psychological turmoil—his obsession with masculinity and rejection of anything resembling Unoka's laziness. It critiques rigid gender roles in Igbo society, where emotions (associated with women) are suppressed.
4. "The Sun Will Shine on Those Who Stand Before It Shines on Those Who Kneel Under Them"
Unoka uses this proverb to evade debt collectors:
"Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them. I shall pay my big debts first." (Achebe 6)
Interpretation:
Unoka's manipulation of proverbs reveals his cunning but irresponsible nature. Debt is a serious matter in Igbo culture; Unoka's evasion highlights his disregard for communal expectations.

Functions of Proverbs in the Novel
Character Development
Proverbs serve as psychological mirrors for key figures:

- Okonkwo: His frequent use of proverbs reflects his desire to embody Igbo ideals. Yet, his misapplication of them (e.g., his violent interpretation of masculinity) reveals his tragic rigidity.
- Unoka: His witty but self-serving proverbs expose his inability to meet societal standards.
- Obierika: Unlike Okonkwo, he uses proverbs thoughtfully, embodying the Igbo ideal of balanced wisdom.

Conveying Igbo Wisdom and Social Norms
Proverbs distill the Igbo worldview:

- Justice: *"When a man says yes, his chi says yes also"* (Achebe 27) – Emphasizes personal responsibility.
- Community: *"A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness"* (Achebe 19) – Stresses humility and reciprocity.
- Fate: *"If one finger brought oil, it soiled the others"* (Achebe 125) – Warns against collective guilt.

These sayings are not abstract but guide daily life, from settling disputes to child-rearing.
Foreshadowing and Tragedy
Proverbs subtly predict Umuofia's downfall:

- *"Living fire begets cold, impotent ash"* (Achebe 153) – Foreshadows Okonkwo's fiery spirit leading to his barren legacy.
- *"Eneke the bird says since men have learned to shoot without missing, he has learned to*

fly without perching" (Achebe 22) – Hints at the Igbo's need to adapt to survive colonialism.

The cyclical structure of proverbs (e.g., beginnings and endings echoing each other) mirrors the novel's tragic arc.

Folktales and Myths: Framing History and Morality in *Things Fall Apart*

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe masterfully weaves traditional Igbo folktales and myths into the fabric of his novel, using them as both literary devices and cultural artifacts. These stories—whether about the cunning tortoise or the ominous silence of Mother Kite—serve multiple purposes: they reinforce communal values, explain the workings of the universe, and foreshadow the novel's central conflicts. More importantly, they act as a counter-narrative to colonial discourse, presenting Igbo society as one with its sophisticated systems of knowledge and morality.

This section examines three key oral narratives in the novel:

"The Birds and the Tortoise" – A parable of ambition and downfall that mirrors Okonkwo's tragedy.

The Abame Story (Mother Kite and the Duckling) – A cautionary tale about unseen threats, symbolizing colonialism.

The Role of the Oracle – Myths that structure Igbo cosmology and decision-making.

Through these stories, Achebe demonstrates how oral traditions preserve history, teach ethics, and respond to societal changes.

1. "The Birds and the Tortoise": A Mirror of Okonkwo's Rise and Fall

One of the most significant folktales in the novel is the story of the tortoise who tricks birds into lending him feathers to fly to a feast in the sky, only to meet disaster due to his greed. This tale is recounted in Chapter 11 and serves as an allegory for Okonkwo's life:

"The birds were very happy and flew about singing praises of the tortoise… But when the time came to fly home, the tortoise could not, because he had broken his shell in the fall." (Achebe 96)

Parallels to Okonkwo's Tragic Arc

- Ambition and Hubris:
  - The tortoise's cunning mirrors Okonkwo's relentless drive for success. Both manipulate their way to the top (the tortoise through deceit, Okonkwo through sheer will).
  - Just as the tortoise declares himself "the king of the birds," Okonkwo earns titles and respect in Umuofia, only to overreach.
- Downfall and Isolation:
  - The tortoise's fall from the sky parallels Okonkwo's exile and eventual suicide. Both are left broken and alienated.
  - The tortoise's shattered shell symbolizes Okonkwo's fractured identity—his inability to reconcile tradition with change.
- Cultural Commentary:
  - The tale warns against selfishness and unchecked ambition, values that Okonkwo embodies tragically.
  - It also reflects the Igbo belief in cosmic justice: actions have consequences, a theme central to the novel.

2. The Abame Story: Colonialism as the "Silent Threat"

Another pivotal folktale is the parable of Mother Kite and the Duckling, told by Uchendu in Chapter 15. In this story:

"Mother Kite sends her daughter to fetch food. The young kite returns with a duckling, but when asked what the mother duck said, she replies, 'Nothing.' Mother Kite insists the duckling be returned, sensing danger in the silence. The next day, the kite brings a chick whose mother 'cried and raved.' 'Now we can eat,' says Mother Kite, 'for there is nothing to fear from someone who shouts.'" (Achebe 140)

Symbolism and Foreshadowing

- The Silent Threat of Colonialism:
  - The white man in Abame, like the silent duckling, appears harmless but brings destruction. The oracle's warning (*"a white man would break their clan and spread destruction"*) echoes Mother Kite's wisdom.
  - The Abame massacre (where villagers kill a white man and are later annihilated by colonists) fulfills this prophecy, illustrating

the fatal consequences of ignoring subtle dangers.

- Igbo Wisdom vs. Colonial Naivety:
    - The story critiques Abame's rashness—they act without fully understanding the threat, unlike Mother Kite's caution.
    - It also underscores a key Igbo value: silence can be more dangerous than open hostility, a lesson Okonkwo fails to learn.

3. Myths and Igbo Cosmology: The Oracle's Role

Myths in *Things Fall Apart* are not mere superstitions but foundational to Igbo cosmology. The Oracle of the Hills and Caves (Agbala) is central to this system:

"The Oracle was called Agbala, and people came from far and near to consult it. They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbors." (Achebe 11)

Functions of Myth in the Novel

- Explaining Natural and Social Order:
    - The Oracle justifies societal decisions, such as Ikemefuna's sacrifice, which is deemed necessary to appease the earth goddess.
    - Myths like the creation story of the *"sky and earth quarrel"* (referenced in Chapter 4) explain environmental phenomena and moral codes.
- Conflict and Tragedy:
    - Okonkwo's defiance of the Oracle's warning (*"Do not bear a hand in his death"*) leads to his exile, showing the consequences of disregarding divine will.
    - The Oracle's prophecies (e.g., the arrival of the white man) frame colonialism as an inevitable, almost mythological force.
- Cultural Authenticity:
    - Achebe contrasts Igbo myths with Christian dogma, highlighting how both systems provide meaning but are incompatible. The missionaries dismiss the Oracle as "false gods," but the novel presents it as a legitimate spiritual authority.

Achebe's use of folktales and myths in *Things Fall Apart* achieves three critical goals:

1. Preservation: He documents Igbo oral traditions that colonialism sought to erase.
2. Moral Instruction: The stories teach lessons about ambition, caution, and respect for tradition.
3. Narrative Depth: They enrich the plot, offering allegories that mirror the novel's themes.

By centering these narratives, Achebe asserts that African literature is not derivative but rooted in its rich storytelling heritage. The tortoise's fall, Mother Kite's wisdom, and the Oracle's prophecies are not just tales—they are the bedrock of Igbo identity, surviving even as Umuofia "falls apart."

Orality vs. Written Discourse: Achebe's Hybrid Narrative Style in *Things Fall Apart*

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a groundbreaking novel not only for its portrayal of pre-colonial Igbo society but also for its innovative narrative style, which merges African oral traditions with Western literary forms. Achebe's approach challenges the colonial literary canon, which often depicted Africa as a "dark continent" devoid of history, culture, or sophisticated storytelling (Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*). Instead, he crafts a hybrid narrative that:

1. Incorporates Igbo oral aesthetics (proverbs, folktales, communal storytelling).
2. Uses the Western novel structure (linear plot, psychological character development).
3. Subverts colonial discourse by asserting an authentic African perspective.

This section explores how Achebe blends these elements, creating a narrative that is both culturally specific and universally resonant.

1. Blending Igbo Oral Traditions with Western Literary Forms

A. Oral Storytelling Techniques in a Written Novel

Achebe mimics the cadence and structure of Igbo oral performance in his prose:

- Communal Narration:
    - The novel often adopts a collective voice, reflecting the Igbo tradition of group storytelling. For example, the assembly of elders in Chapter 2 debates Ikemefuna's fate in a way that mirrors

village *mbari* (storytelling gatherings).
    - Key events (e.g., the wrestling match, the killing of Ikemefuna) are described through communal reactions rather than individual introspection.
- Repetition and Rhythm:
    - Achebe uses repetition to evoke oral recitation, as in the phrase *"Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and beyond"* (Achebe 3), which mimics the call-and-response patterns of Igbo storytelling.
    - Proverbs are repeated with slight variations, reinforcing their cultural weight (e.g., *"The sun will shine on those who stand…"* appears in multiple contexts).
- Non-Linear Time:
    - While the novel follows a broadly linear plot, it includes flashbacks (e.g., Unoka's shameful death) and digressions (e.g., the tale of the tortoise) typical of oral narratives.

B. The Novel as a "Written Orality"

Achebe's style bridges the gap between oral and written literature:

- Embedded Folktales:
    - Stories like *"The Birds and the Tortoise"* (Ch. 11) are nested within the main narrative, functioning as both entertainment and moral commentary—a hallmark of African orature.
    - These tales are not footnoted or exoticized; they are presented as organic parts of Igbo life.
- Proverbs as Narrative Anchors:
    - Over 50 proverbs appear in the novel, serving as thematic guideposts. For example, *"When a man says yes, his chi says yes"* (Ch. 4) encapsulates the Igbo belief in personal agency.

Thematic Reflections of Oral Tradition in *Things Fall Apart*

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is not merely a novel but a cultural archive, preserving Igbo oral traditions while confronting the forces of colonialism. Through proverbs, folktales, and communal storytelling, Achebe weaves a narrative that reflects the resilience, tragedy, and adaptability of African oral culture. Three key themes emerge from this interplay: (1) the clash between oral traditions and colonial erasure, (2) the role of storytelling in preserving Igbo identity, and (3) the tension between individual tragedy and cultural continuity. These themes underscore how oral tradition functions as both a narrative device and a tool of resistance in Achebe's work.

1. Cultural Clash: Oral Traditions vs. Colonial Erasure

The arrival of European missionaries in Umuofia marks a direct assault on Igbo oral traditions. Colonialism seeks not only political domination but also cultural erasure, dismissing indigenous knowledge as primitive superstition. Achebe illustrates this through:

- The Dismissal of Igbo Cosmology
  The missionaries mock Igbo beliefs, labeling their gods "false" and their stories "heathen tales." When Mr. Brown, the missionary, debates Akunna, an elder, he fails to grasp the symbolic depth of Igbo oral traditions. Akunna explains that Chukwu, the supreme god, communicates through lesser deities, much as a father speaks through intermediaries. This layered understanding of divinity—rooted in oral tradition—is reduced to "idolatry" by the colonizers (Achebe 179).
- The Silencing of Oral Histories
  The District Commissioner's memoir, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, epitomizes colonial historiography, which overwrites African voices. Okonkwo's suicide—a tragic act of defiance—is reduced to a "paragraph" in the Commissioner's notes (Achebe 209). This mirrors real colonial archives that erased African agency, reinforcing Achebe's critique of Eurocentric narratives.
- The Subversion of Proverbs
  Proverbs, once the "palm-oil with which words are eaten," lose their authority in the colonial regime. When the kotma (court messengers) mock the elders, saying, "The white man is clever… He has put a knife on the things that held us together," they invert Igbo wisdom to justify oppression (Achebe 176). This reflects how colonialism

weaponizes language to dismantle oral traditions.

2. Identity and Memory: Storytelling as Preservation

Despite colonial disruption, oral traditions endure as vessels of Igbo identity. Achebe embeds folktales and myths to show how memory resists erasure.

- Folktales as Cultural Anchors
  Stories like "The Tortoise and the Birds" are not mere entertainment but moral guides. The tortoise's greed mirrors Okonkwo's hubris, teaching that unchecked ambition leads to downfall. Even as Umuofia fractures, such tales persist, reinforcing Igbo values for new generations.
- Proverbs as Collective Wisdom
  Proverbs encode history and ethics. When Uchendu asks, "Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why it is that one of the commonest names we give our children is Nneka, or 'Mother is Supreme'?" (Achebe 133), he invokes oral tradition to remind Okonkwo of maternal resilience—a counter to his rigid masculinity. These sayings survive colonialism, adapting to new struggles.
- The Unbroken Chain of Storytelling
  The novel's closing lines—where the Commissioner reduces Okonkwo's life to a footnote—contrast with the Igbo oral tradition, where "the story outlives the warrior" (Obiechina 53). Achebe implies that while colonialism may distort history, oral narratives ensure cultural survival.

3. Tragedy and Continuity: Okonkwo's Fall vs. Oral Tradition's Resilience

Okonkwo's tragic arc symbolizes the collapse of traditional structures, yet oral tradition endures beyond him.

- Okonkwo's Resistance to Change
  His rigid adherence to tradition ("If a man says yes, his chi says yes") becomes his undoing. When he kills Ikemefuna despite Ogbuefi Ezeudu's warning, he violates oral wisdom, setting his downfall in motion. His suicide—an abomination in Igbo culture—signifies the limits of uncompromising traditionalism in a changing world.
- Oral Tradition's Adaptability
  While Okonkwo dies defiant, characters like Obierika and Uchendu demonstrate how oral culture evolves. Obierika questions the Oracle's decree yet respects communal decisions, showing that tradition thrives through critical engagement, not blind adherence.
- The Paradox of Colonial Encounter
  The missionaries' Bible stories, though foreign, follow the same didactic patterns as Igbo folktales. This irony suggests that oral tradition cannot be fully erased—only transformed. The persistence of proverbs in postcolonial Igbo society today affirms this resilience.

II. CONCLUSION

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* stands as a monumental work in African literature not only for its vivid portrayal of pre-colonial Igbo society but also for its masterful integration of oral traditions into written narrative. Through proverbs, folktales, and communal storytelling, Achebe structures his novel in a way that mirrors Igbo oral aesthetics while also embedding deeper philosophical and historical truths. His work serves as both a literary achievement and a political act—reclaiming African narratives from colonial distortion and asserting the sophistication of indigenous knowledge systems.

Ultimately, *Things Fall Apart* is more than a tragedy about Okonkwo—it is a testament to the enduring power of oral tradition. Achebe does not merely document Igbo culture; he performs it, ensuring that even as colonial forces attempt to silence African voices, the stories live on. In doing so, he offers a blueprint for how literature can be both an artistic and a political act—one that preserves the past while shaping the future.

As long as these stories are told, Umuofia—and the countless real societies it represents—never fully falls apart.

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