

**Oral Culture as an Excavation Site for Moral Redemption: The Case of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Kenjo Jumbam's *The White Man of God***

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**Abstract**

Many researchers have identified that African oral culture has contributed enormously to the development of African literary discourse in written European languages, but exploring how oral culture can be exploited to review contemporary realities is still inadequate. This paper demonstrates that oral culture in the contemporary African novel written in the English language can be consulted as an excavation site for moral redemption in the present global context that is visibly assaulted by high technological advancement. Using *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *The white man of God* by Kenjo Jumbam, this work identifies and explores aspects of African oral culture and illustrates how they can be used as archaeological dig sites to review political, economic and socio-cultural concerns in this modern era. Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and Jumbam in *The white man of God* use different aspects of African oral culture as tools to emphasize commitment in their creative endeavours to evaluate the contemporary experience and propose a way forward. Using new historicism and the theory of negritude for the analysis of these texts, the study revealed that African oral culture in the written text is committed to the wellbeing of the African people. It assumes that the written text in the English language taps from the African oral tradition to evaluate African collective morality and carve a path for the future. Through careful reading of how the two writers tactfully put the oral forms into print, the study concluded that the two novelists share the opinion that looking back into African oral communities and their different cultural reservoirs sustained by their oral cultural forms is one of the relevant ways forward into a wider global context. The findings revealed that the boundaries between oral culture and the written text are porous with respect to the African novel and that the authentic destiny of the modern African is in tapping from the past that is sustained by its oral culture. The conclusion here is that oral culture can be revisited to excavate significant knowledge systems that can be used to address contemporary social concerns and for this reason, the two novels are read as excavation sites for moral redemption.

**Keywords:** oral culture, African novel, excavation, moral, redemption

### **Introduction**

This paper investigates the significance of oral culture to the moral climate of 21st-century Africans in the contemporary African novel of English expression. The use of oral culture in the written African novel defines it in terms of the African socio-cultural and natural contexts. The contention here is that African cultural aesthetics that exist in the oral cultures of the African people is what gives African written literature a distinct flavour since writers employ them in their creative works to carve an authentic literary path that is significant to the African context. *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *The white man of God* by Kenjo Jumbam contain aspects of African oral culture which this paper explores as excavation sites for moral redemption. The idea here is that with the present global dispensation, the African is almost lost when it comes to authenticity in moral, political, economic and socio-cultural values. In this digital era when African youths are almost dabbling in a cultural vacuum due to modern and invading technological innovations and inventions such as Tiktok, WhatsApp, Phoenix, and Pinterest alongside activities like eyelashes, Breast increase, buttock enlargement and other forms of make-up, there is an urgent need for a review of cultural forms that harbour a lifestyle which is relevant to the African as a distinct being in the global village.

This paper explores the contemporary African novel as an archaeological dig site to excavate material that houses and transmits cultural and moral values relevant to the existence of Africans as distinct humans with a unique civilization. It also identifies some aspects of oral culture to demonstrate how authors engage with communal wisdom, ethical conundrums, and the complexities of human experience. This calls for a thorough search for authentic moral, cultural, political, economic and pedagogic material that is relevant to the African student, leader, politician, teacher, parent, preacher or child concerning their existence as a distinct individual with a specific but universal perception of life.

The oral art forms which lodge significant moral values, mores and lores relevant to the well-being of the Africans and all their institutions have not been given adequate attention. The contemporary African novels of English expression as exemplified by the ones here studied have preserved some of the authentic material which if excavated and utilized alongside other means can lead to moral reawakening among youths of the present and future generations. Given the bitter and restive mood of modern times, there is a need for a reappraisal of the political, social, economic and moral effects of the borrowed culture and spiritual values of the new technological innovations, inventions and new forms of communication. Dorothea E. Schulz writes:

The concept of African “Oral culture” is closely related to “Oral literature” and “Oral tradition” whereas oral literature designates the various forms of literature delivered by words of mouth, the broader notion of “oral culture” shifts the focus away from the product, that is, the text, and includes the historical circumstance and social setting in which the delivery of the oral text takes place. (1994:359-360)

The contention here is that oral literature exists within the confines of oral culture. The concept of oral culture in relationship to oral literature focuses on the social and historical settings in which the unwritten text operates. In these novels, the oral forms that are relevant to the teacher, student, parent and administrator in violence-based schools are preserved in print and can be excavated to reawake the morally dwindling society. Schulz clarifies here that: “Oral culture refers to all practices and habits related to the use of the spoken word and draws attention to the consistency of the practices of oral communication. In what follows the various products of oral culture will be referred to as oral literature” (1994:359). The implication here is that oral literature is a component of society’s oral culture since oral culture refers to all practices and habits related to the spoken word. The expression oral culture is therefore a superordinate term whose hyponyms include oral literature, oral performance, oral tradition, verbal art, oral art, and folklore.

On its part, the word excavation as related to oral culture in the context of this write-up signifies the act of unearthing, exploring and uncovering the profound layers of communal memory, traditional wisdom and cultural heritage, which the authors employ in their narratives. In the *Random House Webster's College Dictionary*, Excavation is "to expose or lay bare by or as if by digging; unearth. An area in which excavating has been done or is in progress, as an archaeological site" (458). It can therefore be said that the word excavation as used in this study evokes the idea of bringing to light the diverse oral forms that are deeply engrained in African oral communities, which the novelists explore to give their works a distinct literary flavour. Concerning the novels under study, excavation is used to symbolize the act of reclaiming and preserving oral heritage that forms the foundation of African communal identity and ethos. The African novel is a relevant site for excavation with respect to this study because it delves into the depths of ancestral wisdom, traditional values and ethical insights through the use of various oral genres. The exploration of the novel to excavate material for moral redemption will aid in highlighting the enduring relevance of ancestral teachings and communal customs that shape the fabric of African oral societies. The word reflects the endeavour to identify the significance of oral forms such as storytelling, proverbs and other traditional practices that house the mores and lores of the oral communities in Africa. In the two novels under reference in this paper, excavation is used to encapsulate the process of unveiling moral guidance by looking into the oral forms that give the contemporary African novel a unique colour.

Against this background, Chinua Achebe has stated that: "Africans did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity" (1973:10). This philosophy, value, beauty, poetry and dignity are lodged in African oral cultures. The oral cultures of the Africans like those

of other peoples in the world house significant social and moral values that shape the direction of their lives. They connect people to their roots, and history and shape their ideology and moral perspectives. The modern African leaders can excavate significant moral, social, economic and political values from the written text, which are viewed by this study as archaeological sites from where to excavate relevant political, social and moral fabric to make their societies a suitable stage for sustainable development. The texts under reference in this study preserve significant information that can be exploited to promote peace and a harmonious existence among Africans.

African written literature partly relies on African oral culture. Though *Things Fall Apart* and *The White Man of God* are written in the English language, the works communicate to the cultures from which they emanate in unique ways because it is their collective philosophies and ideological perspectives that have been put into print. The English in these texts has been adapted to speak to the people because it is a language that has grown from their immediate natural and cultural environments to serve their social, economic, political and educational needs in ways that are suitable to them. That is why Oladele Taiwo is right when he writes: "There was an inordinate attempt to judge Africans by standards imposed from outside, standards which were largely irrelevant to the African situation. Such fiction amounts to little more than propaganda put out with the sole aim of justifying white imperialism in Africa and confirming the imperialist to his position of strength (1967:6). Nkem Okoh shares this point as he observes that: "African oral literature is denied, the enormous attention it deserves, considering its centrality to the development of written literature. It has been pointed out that in virtually every society of the so-called developed world, modern literature was preceded by oral literature, in a sense, fathered by it" (2008:273-274).

### **Theoretical Consideration**

To attain the goal of this study, the following two analytical tools are employed in the analysis of the two texts selected: new historicism and the theory of negritude.

New historicism aims to understand a work of art through historical context and to understand cultural and intellectual history through literature. It also focuses on the relationship between a text, and the political, social and economic circumstances in which it originated. To this effect, X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia maintain, “New historicism is a cultural study which rejects the notion that literature exists in an aesthetic realm separate from ethical and political categories” (2010:1496). The chief goal of a new historicist critic is therefore to understand the social power as reflected in a literary text. This approach to literary criticism does not treat a text in isolation.

Michael Meyer writes: “Since the 1990’s a development in historical approaches to literature known as new historicism has emphasized the interaction between the historic context of a work and a modern reader’s understanding and interpretation of the work” (2006:1546). Thus, an understanding of the values of a society guides the reader’s interpretation of all the elements of literature that have built the text. The new historicist’s interest in the social, cultural, economic, historical and political climates of the society in which a literary text is created makes this approach relevant to the study of oral culture as an excavation site for moral redemption in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Jumbam’s *The White Man of God*. The two writers write from their different social units of which they are constituent parts.

Leopold Sedar Senghor in his definition of negritude as “the sum total of all African values” (qtd in Irele, 1981:67) brings the African writers to fresh beginnings in their writing. These fresh beginnings start with a call to all creative writers to look back into their culture and identify the

authentic material that defines them as distinct individuals. What this definition by Senghor triggered is the spirit of commitment by African intellectuals to the redefinition of black identity which is deeply rooted in the African oral culture. Aime Cesaire coined the word *negritude* and used it in his epic poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* where he writes: "Negritude is the simple recognition of the fact of being black, and the acceptance of this fact, of our destiny as black people, of our history, and our culture" ([www.blackpast.org](http://www.blackpast.org)). It is in line with the view of Cesaire that the present study has as one of its preoccupations to identify those practices that make the African be defined as one with a unique destiny. The argument in this paper is that African novelists use oral culture as a platform on which to forge a powerful connection between the past, present and future.

According to Irele, as a movement and as a concept, *negritude* found its origin and received a development in a historical and sociological context whose implication for those whom it affected were indeed wideranging, and which ultimately provoked in them a multitude of responses that were often contradictory, although always significant. In its immediate reference *negritude* refers to the literary and ideological movement of French -speaking black intellectuals, which took form as a distinctive and significant aspect of the comprehensive reaction of the black man to the colonial situation, a situation that was felt and perceived by black people in Africa and the new world as a state of global subjection to the political, social and moral domination of the West (1981:67).

This observation is in line with Leopold Sedar Senghor, Aime Cesaire and Leon Damas who pointed out that although the colonial policy of assimilation was theoretically based on a belief that the acquisition of European cultures was to bring civilization to Africa, in practice it assumed that contemporary African had no culture or history. The contemporary African writers responded to this misjudgment with commitment which entailed bringing out the mystic warmth of African

life, gaining strength from its closeness to nature and its constant contact with ancestors, that Africans must look to their cultural heritage to determine the values that are most useful in the modern world.

### **Textual Analysis**

*African Lifestyle in the contemporary African novel as a way of retrieving the past*

This section of the work discusses the African lifestyle as lived in a cultural and traditional setting, which many African youths, especially those born and bred in urban settings are out of touch with. In the two novels under reference in this study, Achebe and Jumban preserve the lifestyle as lived in their different social units, which this paper sees as one of the areas where moral values can be excavated. For instance, in the feast that Okonkwo organizes to show gratitude to his mother's people for their kindness to him during his seven years of exile, the unwritten beliefs of the people which shape their lifestyle are brought out. Uchendu who is the eldest among them is given a kola nut to break. He breaks and prays to the ancestors, asking them for wealth and children. This prayer reveals that which is significant to their communal existence as a people. In his explanation, he who has health and people has wealth and fame. The new historicist view that a work of art cannot be isolated from the historical, cultural, social and political activities of its milieu and moment is demonstrable here in that traditionally, Uchendu is the eldest person and culturally he is the one to break the kola nut as a sign of respect in the Igbo social life. The breaking of the kola nut in any Igbo social gathering and prayer to the ancestors after breaking it are activities that emanate from their historical and socio-cultural realities which a new historicist finds important to the understanding of the literary text.

In their philosophical thoughts man needs one another to lean on and not material things. Uchendu becomes an instructor of their ways of life as he uses the following proverb to encourage his people to live together



and sustain human relationships: “An animal rubs its itchy flank against a tree a man asks his kinsman to scratch him” (132). The message that this proverb transmits emanates from the Igbo oral culture and philosophical thinking which encourages love and harmonious living that put emphasis on the human person and not what a person has achieved. Among the Igbos like other Africans, man is because others are. This is indicative of the fact that oral culture can be preserved using the written form so that it continues to serve. The modern African needs to tap from these messages in the proverbs to revisit his relationships with his/her environment. African youths need a thorough moral reevaluation to carve a path for a better future. Uchendu’s proverb echoes the collective voice of the present that has persistently pointed out that the present generation has embraced an empty lifestyle and has thus become almost irrelevant in their communities because they do not look at what is right from the perspective of their oral cultures. The distinctive philosophy of the Igbo oral community is brought out in this proverb which among other aspects indicates that *Things Fall Apart* is an archaeological dig site for moral redemption. This illustrates the fact that these texts can contribute to helping societies to regain lost moral values.

The proverb highlights the fact that the African has a unique way of education in their respective communities which is oral but effective. The image of the tree, animal and kinsman are pedagogic tools employed for ethical instruction. This implies that the African people are not ignorant of a competent approach to learning. Uchendu selects teaching aids that are to function in effective communication and are relevant to the audience. The unwritten beliefs and attitudes towards others in their daily lives are put in print in the text. The activities that characterize the whole atmosphere of the feast and the beliefs that pilot all that is taking place emanate from the oral culture of the people. Their oral culture makes them distinct individuals from other Africans since the unwritten forms are context-bound.

Also, the reader comes across another aspect of the Igbo lifestyle as spelt out by their customs and tradition, which is their perception of suicide as an abominable act. In their oral culture, the body of someone who has committed suicide is evil and can only be buried by strangers. The district commissioner becomes a student of their customs as he questions Obierika on the subject of Okonkwo who has committed suicide thus:

Why can't you take him down yourselves? He asked. It is against our customs, said one of the men. It is an abomination for a man to take his own wife. It is an offence against the earth and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it..... We cannot bury him. Only strangers can. We shall pay your men to do it. When he has been buried, we will then do our duty by him. We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land. (165)

The interactions in the aforementioned quotation throw light on the Igbo beliefs and customs regarding suicide. The oral forms put into print can be used to reconstruct a political and moral dwindling society. In the Igbo oral community, suicide is sacrilege and an offence against the earth. A man who takes his own life can only be buried by strangers and after burial sacrifices are made to cleanse the desecrated land. This is a historical fact in the Igbo tradition. The theory of negritude seeks to regain the history and identity of the black people and the subject and discussion on the issue of suicide can be read as a way of regaining the history and identity of the Igbo people. That is probably why Obierika says, "we cannot bury him. Only strangers can" (165). This is to maintain their history, culture and tradition.

Furthermore, the conversation between Obierika and the district commissioner allows finding out that the content of the Igbo lives is similar to theirs, and that they are affected by the same things – love, honour, beauty betrayal, and duty. Here the Igbos see the content of their lives being elevated into art. The content of this conversation amuses, enrages and at the same time enlightens. The background information which Obierika gives the district commissioner about the Igbo perspective

on suicide validates the new historicist leaning that the aesthetic realm of literature cannot be

From the preceding, one can say that the African novel aids in the preservation of the important aspects of oral culture. In this way, the novel becomes an archaeological dig site for moral reawakening. It transports useful knowledge on how to live within the Igbo oral society. The conversation between Obierika and the district commissioner encapsulates the accumulated wisdom of generations that serves as a moral touchstone offering guidance and reflection on human conduct.

Also, in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe brings out the traditional Ibo marriage procedure as seen in Obierika's compound. His daughter, Akueke's suitor and his people have to come to do the marriage rites as it is customary in Ibo culture. Women are in a different corner and are concerned with cooking while Obierika's elder brother and other elders and people who matter in the community are in his obi with the visitors. The men drink the palm wine that Akueke's suitor brought and their conversation centred on other subjects different from the one that brought them to Obierika's house. Looking back into the traditional ways of life through these novels is essential because the works contain a rich repertoire of socio-cultural and moral values that can help combat the absurdities of modernity and modern ways of living.

The events presented confront the false sense of comfort where moral erosion permeates both the rural and urban environments. The texts can be read as agents of renewal and harbingers of a new universal order. The marriage rites of Obierika's daughters and their procedure are indicative of the fact that the African novel written in English is an adaptation of a European form to respond to specific local experiences. After conversing on different topics, they go to the main issues. The Africans in the postcolonial era have embraced an attractive illusion as an inevitable process of social formation. The discovery that the allure of

modernity is deceptive calls for the need to move forward by looking back. In the theory of negritude, Cesaire and Senghor believe that Africans must look into their cultural heritage to determine the values that are most useful in the modern world. When Achebe describes the marriage procedure of Obierika's daughter, it can be seen as a way of looking into the African cultural heritage to maintain moral values and a unique identity. Negritude is concerned with African history, culture and identity and these are enhanced and sustained by the lifestyle of the people. The gap between the mirage of modern lifestyle and its consequences is marked by a combination of negatives. This study does not in any way insinuate that all about African culture is good and all about foreign culture is bad. What it hopes to reiterate is that the positive values in the oral cultures of the African people as evidenced in the African novel can be excavated for moral redemption in the digital era.

*Oral tradition and the African judiciary system*

This is the section of the study which illustrates how the African judiciary system which exists in an unwritten form can be seen to contain positive moral and ethical values that can contribute to moral reawakening. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe presents the way of settling marital and land disputes from an African perspective. This is evident in the text as the reader witnesses the case between Uzowulu and his wife Mgbafo. The Egwugwu is a traditional and sacred structure that handles all cases in the land. Tapping from these texts which this study reads as archaeological dig sites, one can be equipped with a material that can disturb the false sense of comfort among the African youths where moral erosion permeates both urban and rural environments. The context is one in which religion, education and the marriage institutions have lost on the rise every day in African societies and this is partly because the methods used to curb it are either inefficient or irrelevant.

The written African text in the English language helps to sustain significant information that can advance society and make our world a comfortable place. Okonkwo is one of the greatest men in Umuofia but he is an equal citizen in front of the law. Everybody is expected to respect aged-long traditions and customs to sustain a morally stable and orderly society. This is illustrated in the text when Okonkwo goes against their customs and breaks the weak of peace Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess calls on Okonkwo in his obi the next morning in rage and rejects his offer of kola nut which he places before him as he rebukes: “take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors” (24). Okonkwo’s attempts to justify his action are ignored by the priest who reminds him that he is not a stranger in Umuofia and moves forward to pronounce his penalty in a commanding tone thus: “You will bring to the shrine of ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and hundred cowries” (24). Okonkwo is penalized because his crime is clear as enshrined in their unwritten culture. The priest reminds: “You have committed a great evil.... The evil you have committed ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us his increase and we shall all perish” (24). This aspect can be exploited to review our present social interactions where the powerful people in society are above the law even when they kill.

From the aforementioned, one notices that the oral culture that appears in print in the novel of English expression can be exploited to reconstruct a political and morally stable society. What we come across in the oral culture of the people of Umuofia parallels what obtains in our present modern societies where many situations have proven that the law is meant only for the less privileged. In many post-independent African communities, the leaders are so corrupt and have contributed to moral bankruptcy. There is a lot of favouritism and injustice. But in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo who is one of the greatest men in Umuofia is punished

just like any other member of the society. This incident can be used as a lesson for a redefinition of a new moral order in our various communities.

Also, through a careful reading of the written African novel of English expression the oral history of the people and how they live in their world is highlighted thus: “It was the first time in many years that a man had broken the sacred peace. People talk of nothing but the nso-ani that Okonkwo had committed. It is written that even the oldest men only remember one or two occasions in the dim past” (25). Ogbuefi Ezeudu, who was the oldest man in the village was relating to other men who came to visit him that the punishment for breaking the peace of ani had become very mild in their clan... “My father told me that he had been told that in the past a man who broke the peace was dragged through the village until he died. But after a while, this custom was stopped because it spoiled the peace which it was meant to preserve” (25). From the foregoing, the reader taps from the oral cultures of the Ibos to forge a way forward. Ezeudu further commented “It is a bad custom which these people observed because they lacked understanding” (25).

From their discussion, one can see how people with unwritten laws manage their communities from generation to generation. They succeed to bring in innovations into the oral institutions to lead better lives. They revisit the punishment to maintain human dignity and respect for human rights. The implication here is that we can also revisit our traditional leadership pattern and constitutions to carve a better future. In most of our independent states in Africa, many of our practices are archaic and we have situations where the computer-driven generation is ruled by living ancestors. The countries in the sub-Saharan African region where people stay in the same position for more than four decades and the troubles in the region as a result of lack of foresight are indicative of the fact that we can turn to the contemporary African novel and excavate relevant and useful Indigenous knowledge which can redirect our path to a better future. Due to their age, they simply drag their countries

backwards. Their consciences are dead and most of their philosophies are absurd and irrelevant in context. The preceding discussion presents lessons that the present generation can tap from to build a more harmonious society. The lesson that can be deduced from Ezeudu's historical information is that many problems we face can be solved through dialogue and peaceful negotiations rather than violence and force because such brings untold human suffering and misery in the community. When a method to a problem affects people negatively, it is important to stop and rethink, review and reshape it to be suitable for a more humane atmosphere. New historicism takes into consideration the historical, political, social and cultural activities that have informed the literary work but do not ignore the nonliterary for it helps in the understanding of the literary. The oral history as narrated by Ezeudu contains relevant moral lessons for the contemporary African generation.

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That woman standing there is my wife Mgbafo married her with my money and yams. I do not owe my in-laws anything. I owe them no yams. I owe them no coco-yams. One morning three of them came to my house,

beat me up and took my wife and children away (73). He further explains that he went to them to collect his wife and when they refused, he requested a refund of his bride price following the laws of the land.

On the other hand, Mbagfo's brother Odukwe gave his side of the story saying, "My in-law, Uzowulu is a beast. My sister lived with him for nine years. During those years no single day passed in the sky without him beating the woman. We have tried to settle their quarrels time without number and on each occasion Uzowulu was guilty" (73). Odekwe cites an instance in which Uzowulu beat their sister and she miscarried even when she was recovering from an illness.

The above interaction between Uzowulu and Odukwe indicates that violence against women plagues our contemporary African communities. Most men are like Uzowulku who try to tell lies against his wife to justify his crimes. The head of Egwugwu, the evil forest sought the opinion of Uzuwolu's neighbours who testified that all that Odukwe had said was the truth. The nine Egwugwu concerted and evil forest concluded thus: "We have heard both sides of the case.... Our duty is not to blame this man or to praise him, but to settle the dispute. He turned to Uzowulu's group and allowed a short pause.... Go to your in-laws with a pot of wine and beg your wife to return to you. It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman" (75). From the above-mentioned conflict between Uzowulu and Udokwe, which is triggered by gender-based violence, the reader draws a lot of lessons. It can be seen that due to repeated beatings Mbagfo received from her husband, her brother and family members decide to take her home to save her life

One also learns from the conclusion of Evil Forest that when a man fights with a woman it is not a mark of bravery but a sign of ridiculous weakness. Odukwe refers to the act of beating a woman as madness. This implies that all men who beat their wives are mad. The verdict given by Evil Forest in the case is meant to reconcile the family of Mbagfo and that



of Uzowulu so that peace can reign because the conflict between the husband and wife is easily extended to both families.

Oral culture in the contemporary African novel written in the English language provides material that can be excavated for moral redemption. The case has not followed any written laws and there is no room for one party to appeal to bring in corruption. The neighbours testify that Uzowulu has been beating his wife irrespective of her condition or health and Evil Forest who makes it clear that their role is not to blame any party but to restore order based on truth instructs him to go and beg her. He is equally warned him to die from his “Madness”.

This structure headed by Evil Forest handles all cases on the land including complicated land disputes. This approach to conflict resolution is effective because it is relevant to the lives of the people. It follows their rhythm of life and is accurate because it is done in the language they understand. This is different from what takes place in court where people over property and children. From the perspective of the Igbo oral culture, if the situation were such that Mgbafo was not to return to Uzowulu’s house, her family would simply return her bride price and the marriage would become void.

The perspective from which the case on gender dispute has been handled presents *Things Fall Apart* as a conceptual exposition of a distinctive African mode of consciousness and the elaboration of a specific Igbo or African vision of the universe. The approach to resolving their problems goes beyond an account of Igbo or African values and moves towards a fuller explication of their profound essence.

### **Oral culture and perception of conflict**

This section of the work seeks to explore the perception of conflict and how it is resolved as an aspect of African oral culture from which moral values can be excavated. Conflict resolution seen from the angle of Nso oral tradition in *The White Man of God* contains indigenous knowledge

that is significant to contemporary society. For example, Jumbam brings a case of baptism in the Roman Catholic church and the conditions to be met to be qualified for it to closer examination. Fonjo, who has three wives and children is asked to send away the first two and their children for the third wife to be baptized and accepted into the church. The baptism conditions violate the Nso culture of polygamy where Fadda asks Fonjo, Dubila's husband to send away his two wives and children. This situation presents a clash of two cultures. The Nso traditional religion sees nothing wrong with polygamy while the white man's religion sees it as a sin. This demand from the church is a source of conflict and tension in Fonjo's family. What one deciphers from this conflict and tension in Fonjo's household is that no culture is superior to another.

Also, when one notices that which is not in conformity with an institution within a milieu and moment, the right approach should be adopted especially when it involves a family and children. The reverend father seems to suggest that baptism is superior to two women and children who have lived in harmony, peace and understanding with their husband and children under unwritten cultural norms. The requirement for baptism and the approach to the situation is a threat to peace and should be reconsidered or abandoned because it has no consideration for innocent children. This situation exposes the church, its policies and doctrine to criticism. When children from polygamous homes come to participate in building the church and the Rev father's house, the church does not reject their money or labour.

The conflict in Fonjo's compound significantly signifies the clash between the Nso traditional religion and the one brought by the white man. Nso people have lived by this tradition of polygamy for ages. Fonjo as family head has managed the affairs of his household successfully and peacefully. The peace is only broken by the conditions for baptism. Fonjo's statement which is at the same time rhetorical enrages the reader and at the same time instructs. "what do I get from baptism to put away

two wives, two wives with children! .....Why does he want to break up families? Put away two wives with children (52)! Fonjo's observation shows disapproval and further captures the disillusionment of many Africans who saw their communities disintegrating due to the insertion of a foreign culture. Senghor and Césaire in their views on the concept of negritude think that the image of the black man should be redefined through culture. This is demonstrated in *Novel* through Fonjo who questions the white man's doctrine which expects him to send away two wives and innocent children for his third wife to have a baptism. The white man and his religion have demonstrated rudeness, arrogance and lack of respect for the other person's way of life and culture.

Africans need to review some of the practices imposed on them by foreign administrators, especially during the colonial era and with the introduction of Christianity. His half-question half-statement expresses shock and the psychosocial and emotional difficulties that characterize his being. Fonjo's reaction to the Rev, father's demands illustrates the frustration of many Africans with the insertion of a new culture. Simon Gikandi affirms this view when he observes: "It could be said that Africans who were attracted to colonialism because of its association with modernity became disillusioned with it precisely because the process of colonization was often premised on the destruction of precolonial society without providing a free autonomous modern culture in return (1994:470). Such is Ngugi's idea in *The River Between* when Waiyaki remarks that,

a people's traditions could not be swept away overnight. That way lay disintegration. Such a tribe will have no roots for a people's roots were in their traditions, going back to the past, the very beginning... If the white man's religion made you abandon a custom and then did not give you something else of equal value, you become lost. (162-163)

The African novel perceives conflict through the lens of oral culture with a multifaceted approach that reflects the rich and complex nature of social tensions, personal struggles and communal upheavals within

African communities. Jumban in the novel under reference in this paper captures conflict as a dynamic and multi-layered phenomenon drawing upon communal ethos and moral frameworks.

### **Communalism as an aspect of African oral culture**

This section of the paper examines the communal life of the Nso people as an aspect of oral culture which can be revisited as an excavation site for moral redemption. For instance, in the Fai's compound at Mborn deliberations and lamentations center on Dini and Biy Wibah who have committed incest. The men of the Mborn family try to examine the situation in detail to see how such can be avoided in future. The Fai regrets that "this is a blot on the whole family" (70). The culture of getting wives for male children is clearly illustrated in Bana's speech when he explains: We went to the family of the girl that was given to him and said we had come to beg for our grinding stone because we were starving. The Fai of the family said he was about to send for us to say that upon some thorough investigations, it had been found that the girl given to Dini could not be his wife (70). This aspect of the Nso culture can be very relevant to the present generation of eyelashes and android or smartphones who think that anything goes and that they are right because they can read and write the white man's language. The message here is that incest is a blot on the whole family and therefore unacceptable. It is further deduced that before marriage thorough investigations have to be made to avoid future mishaps and embarrassment. This aspect of the oral culture of the Nso people needs to be exploited to rebuild relationships at the family level.

This conversation illustrates the fact that oral culture within the African novel conveys the interconnectedness of community life, where communal storytelling and shared narratives form fundamental elements of social cohesion. The interactions in front of the Fai by different members of the large family of Mborn provide a platform for preserving historical memory, fostering collective identity and engaging in

intergenerational dialogue within the family and the community at large. The traditional practice of gathering in the Fai's compound to seek solutions to issues of concern to the entire family like the sacrilegious act committed by Biy Wibah and Dinni is instructive and can enlighten the present generation on issues of culture. From this viewpoint, the written text becomes an excavation site for moral renaissance.

Furthermore, the mournful atmosphere that punctuates the air in the Fai's compound as Shey Fonki, the family priest prepares to take Dinni and Biy Wibah for the cleansing ceremony is indicative of the fact that Africans in general and the Nso people in particular have a philosophy that defines their wellbeing. They have rules that guide human relationships and unwritten laws and customs that underline their ideology. The fact that no one speaks to each other and everybody has worn a mournful look brings out an aspect of the Nso belief that when a situation or an occurrence is so bad people become speechless. This silence and the sorrowful looks on the faces of all present are indicative of the author's cry of distress against such a horrible event. It is at the same time, a warning to the youth present to die from such abominable acts or face the same humiliation. The narrator describes the event thus:

Everyone then turned back to the compound in the same solemn mood in which they had come out. We were met just outside the compound by the Fai himself. He stood in the centre of the road with a vessel containing some liquid. He sprinkled this on the feet and hands of Dinni and Biy Wibah and on the hands and feet of Shey Fonki (73).

Fai's language is influenced by context. New historicism takes into consideration the context in which the work has been created. Here both the literary and the historical and cultural categories are as important in the interpretation of the work as the aesthetic dimension. The images employed during the cleansing ceremony, which the Fai concludes at the compound have a historical bearing on the lives of the Mborn people and further reflect the occasion and its purpose.

The ceremony portrays Jumbam as a storyteller, an entertainer, a teacher and an enchanter. As a teacher, he encourages and instructs his community to be watchful against aberrant acts that go contrary to moral norms. The cleansing ceremony is meant to dissuade youths who may contemplate acting like Dinni and Biy Wibah. In doing so Jumbam succeeds in preserving the Nso oral culture. In this vein, *The white man of God* can be seen as a consultative document for the excavation of Nso ethical values. The process of cleansing as described in the text is essentially oral but Shey Fonki masters all that needs to be done for the ceremony to be complete. The implication here is that the written text in English survives because of the abundant repertoire of oral material available in our various oral communities. The ceremony brings to light the collective philosophy of the Nso people and beliefs surrounding the sacrilegious act of incest becomes a subject of beautiful literary creativity.

From Yaya's revelation concerning Biy Wibah's pregnancy, one excavates material that carries deep cultural and philosophical messages and indigenous knowledge that many children brought up in urban areas are ignorant of. when Mama asks Biy Wibah when she hopes to leave for Shisong, she does not answer the question. At this point, the reader is in suspense but Yaya intervenes with another question "What should she go there for" (77)?

Here Yaya and Mama communicate different views on the subject but when Biy Wibah says, "I hear you, Yaya" (77). Both Mama and the reader become students of the aspect of Nso culture that has to do with pregnancy that results from incest. Yaya sees her going to the maternity home to have her baby as a "waste of time because such children never live" (77). Yaya's language as she talks with Mama about the subject is dense and loaded with information on beliefs surrounding incest and pregnancy.

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Mama insists that Bih Wibah will go to Shisong and have her baby safely but Yaya who shares the belief that such children never live because “these things are like that” simply concludes: “I will not say no. Do as you think fit” (77). Bih Wibah’s silence to Mama’s question indicates that she is versed in the culture given that she is close to Fai’s compound where a lot of discussion on different topics take place in the presence of Fai and his associates. From the exchange between Yaya and Mama oral culture can be read as a vehicle for imparting ethical teachings, moral insights and communal wisdom. It is a repository of communal values, as it offers a profound understanding of the shared ethos that guides ethical conduct and shapes the ethical framework of the community.

The reader comes to a full understanding of Yaya’s question and Bih Wibah’s silence to Mama’s question when Binla meets the Fai after the harvesting of kola nuts to announce that the pregnancy brought no results. The language here is terse and concentrated. The narrator reports: “Just as we were about to go Binla ran down and told the Fai that he had been sent to say that Biy Wibah’s pot had tumbled down and its content gone to waste” (79). The metaphor of the pot and its content is used to describe Biy Wibah’s pregnancy. When the pot is on fire people wait and hope to eat. But when it is announced that the pot tumbled and the contents went to waste, people become sad and everybody stands solemnly for a while (79). What makes meaning to the members of this community at this moment of the calamity is what the bearer of the bad news emphasized which is “that she herself was not hurt” (79). The Fai’s response to the woman who tried to cry brings all information surrounding the subject to a clearer view as he inquires: “But what strange thing has happened? What is unusual about it? The pot bearer is not hurt. Did anyone expect anything different” (79)? The Fai’s effective use of rhetorical questions allows the reader to prop deeper in the Nso belief and ways of handling complicated ethical problems. The result of the pregnancy reveals that Mama’s beliefs are not relevant in context.

The Fai's emphasis that "The pot bearer is not hurt" suggests a renewed sense of life and hope, which evokes the image of fresh and new beginnings in the life of the entire Nkar oral community. This implies that contemporary Africans can turn to our oral cultures for safety, comfort and refuge. The novelist has forged a distinctive voice and a demonstrable rootedness in our realities and experiences.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated that the oral cultures of the indigenous African people stand as ancestors to the modern African novel written in the English language. The oral forms identified in the two texts contain literary qualities, which affect people at the deepest emotional levels, reveal new insights into ourselves and stretch us by exercising our imaginations. They take us back to where we come from and renew our sense of belonging to an authentic cultural root which defines the African ideological perspective on life. These cultural forms that though written have remained especially oral urgently invite the modern African child for an excavation exercise on moral, ethical, social, economic, cultural and political material relevant to his existence as a global being.

The study also portrayed the fact that Achebe and Jumbam have blended orality and the written form thereby merging two different mindsets and thought processes. The impression gathered from reading Jumbam and Achebe above is that though both characters in their novels speak English, they both speak two different languages reflecting two different mindsets, thought processes, and the natural environments from which their languages emanate since language grows from a specific socio-cultural and natural environment. The novels written in English celebrate the beauty of the spoken word and all that the spoken word transports from one generation to the other in African oral communities. The two writers in their texts under study have adopted authentic voices and tones in their works. Their works have preserved valuable moral material



for future generations and can comfortably be seen as archaeological texts for the excavation of relevant material for moral reawakening.

Achebe and Jumbam have fused oral culture with the written form and this fusion represents the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, breathing life into the narratives that bridge the past and the present. They have all weaved myths and legendary tales within the fabric of their novels and this has endowed their respective novels with a sense of collective memory and cultural continuity. The paper demonstrated that in *Things Fall Apart* and *The White Man of God* Achebe and Jumbam skillfully bring out aspects of African lifestyle through the rich tapestry of oral culture, offering a vivid portrayal of societal values, traditions and communal life. Therefore, oral culture serves as an invaluable lens through which Achebe and Jumbam illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of the African lifestyle. Through their rich engagement with oral culture, their novels serve as rich testaments to the enduring legacy and dynamic nature of African oral societies.

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