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The Role of Oral Tradition in Contemporary African Literature: A Reading of *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of The People* by Chinua Achebe

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ÖZET

Bu çalışma, sözlü geleneğin çağdaş Afrika edebiyatındaki rolünü, özellikle Chinua Achebe'nin *Things Fall Apart* (Parçalanma) ve *A Man of the People* (Halktan Biri) adlı eserleri üzerinden ele almaktadır. Atasözleri, masallar ve toplumsal hikâye anlatımı gibi sözlü gelenekler, Afrika kültürel kimliğinin temel taşlarını oluşturmada ve kültürel değerlerin korunup aktarılmasında kritik bir işlev görmektedir. Achebe'nin romanları, bu unsurları kullanarak geleneksel Afrika hikâye anlatımı ile modern edebi formlar arasında bir köprü kurmaktadır. Çalışmanın temel amacı, sözlü geleneklerin Achebe'nin anlatılarını nasıl zenginleştirdiğini incelemek, geleneksel ile modern değerler arasındaki gerilimleri irdelemek ve Afrika toplumunun sömürgecilik ve sömürge sonrası dönüşümlerine dair daha geniş bir perspektif sunmaktır. Bu bağlamda, postkolonyal bir teorik çerçeve ve nitel metin analizi yöntemleri kullanılarak, Achebe'nin sözlü gelenekleri karakter inşası, tematik derinlik ve toplumsal eleştiri bağlamında stratejik bir biçimde nasıl kullandığı analiz edilmiştir. *Things Fall Apart*, sömürge öncesi Igbo kültürünün zenginliğini ve kırılma anlarını ortaya koyarken, *A Man of the People*, bağımsızlık sonrası dönemdeki yozlaşma ve ahlaki çöküşü eleştirerek, sözlü geleneklerin çağdaş bağlamlara nasıl uyarlanabileceğini göstermektedir. Bulgular, sözlü geleneklerin kültürel mirasın yeniden kazanılmasındaki ve edebi yeniliklerin şekillendirilmesindeki önemini vurgulamaktadır. Çalışma, Afrika edebiyatı ve eğitimine yönelik olarak, sözlü geleneklerin edebiyat ve eğitim süreçlerine daha fazla entegre edilmesinin, kültürel kimliğin korunması ve güçlendirilmesi açısından önemli bir katkı sağlayacağını önermektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Afrika edebiyatı, Kültürel kimlik, Sözlü gelenek, Anlatı teknikleri, Postkolonyalizm

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of oral tradition in contemporary African literature, with a specific focus on Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*. Oral traditions, including proverbs, folktales, and communal storytelling, are foundational to African cultural identity and serve as critical tools for preserving and transmitting cultural values. Achebe's novels incorporate these elements to bridge the gap between traditional African storytelling and modern literary forms. The study seeks to understand how oral traditions enrich Achebe's narratives, offering insight into the tensions between traditional and modern values while addressing the broader implications of colonial and postcolonial transformations in African society. Using a postcolonial theoretical framework and qualitative textual analysis, the research examines Achebe's strategic use of oral traditions in character development, thematic exploration, and social critique. *Things Fall*

Apart highlights the richness and vulnerability of pre-colonial Igbo culture, while A Man of the People critiques the corruption and moral decay of post-independence society, demonstrating the adaptability of oral traditions to contemporary contexts. The findings emphasize the importance of oral traditions in reclaiming cultural heritage and shaping literary innovation. It is recommended that African writers and educators continue to integrate oral traditions into literature and education to foster cultural preservation and identity.

Keywords: African literature, cultural identity, Oral tradition, Narrative technique, Postcolonialism

INTRODUCTION

The role of oral tradition in African literature has been widely recognized as a cornerstone of cultural identity and literary creativity. Scholars such as Ruth Finnegan (*Oral Literature in Africa*) and Isidore Okpewho (*African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity*) have emphasized how oral narratives, proverbs, folktales, and communal storytelling not only preserve cultural heritage but also influence contemporary African literature. Chinua Achebe's works, particularly *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People* exemplify this integration, blending oral traditions with modern narrative techniques to address themes of identity, cultural conflict, and social change. This study seeks to build on existing scholarship by examining Achebe's strategic use of oral traditions to navigate the colonial and postcolonial landscapes depicted in his novels.

While oral traditions are central to African literature, their role in shaping modern narratives and addressing postcolonial challenges remains underexplored. This study investigates how Achebe uses oral traditions to critique colonialism, preserve cultural identity, and explore socio-political issues in a rapidly changing African society.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the function and significance of oral traditions in *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*. Specifically, the research aims to answer the question: How does Chinua Achebe employ oral traditions in his novels to reflect cultural identity and critique societal changes?

This study adopts a postcolonial theoretical framework, drawing on concepts of cultural hybridity (Homi Bhabha), orality and literacy (Walter Ong), and African literary theory. These perspectives illuminate how Achebe blends indigenous oral traditions with modern literary forms to reclaim African narratives and critique colonial and postcolonial realities.

This study is organized into five parts. The first part provides an introduction, and the second part provides a theoretical and historical overview of oral tradition in African literature. The third part focuses on *Things Fall Apart*, analyzing how oral traditions depict pre-colonial Igbo culture and its confrontation with colonialism. Besides, the fourth examines *A Man of the People*, exploring the adaptation of oral traditions to critique post-independence societal issues. The final part synthesizes findings, discusses their implications for African literature, and offers recommendations for future research.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyze the role of oral tradition in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*. The methodology is designed to systematically examine Achebe's use of oral traditions in these novels, focusing on their cultural, thematic, and narrative functions. The study adopts a qualitative textual analysis framework. This method is appropriate for uncovering the layers of meaning embedded in Achebe's integration of oral traditions into his literary works. The analysis centers on identifying and interpreting key elements of oral tradition, such as proverbs, folktales, idioms, and communal storytelling.

The primary data sources are the texts of *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*. Key passages from these novels are selected based on the presence of oral traditional elements. Supporting secondary sources include critical essays, books, and scholarly articles on Achebe's works and African oral literature.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Times New Roman This section presents and discusses the findings of the study on the role of oral tradition in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*. The analysis reveals that oral traditions, including proverbs, folktales, and communal storytelling, are central to Achebe's narrative strategy, serving as tools for cultural preservation, character development, and thematic exploration. In *Things Fall Apart*, oral traditions emphasize the richness of Igbo culture while highlighting the disruption caused by colonial incursion. Conversely, in *A Man of the People*, these traditions adapt to a post-independence context, critiquing societal corruption and the erosion of communal values.

The discussion highlights Achebe's ability to navigate the tension between traditional and modern storytelling forms, demonstrating the adaptability of oral traditions in addressing both historical and contemporary African realities. By blending oral and written narrative techniques, Achebe reclaims African cultural identity while engaging with universal themes of power, morality, and societal change. This section further examines how the use of oral traditions in these novels reflects broader socio-political transformations in African society, reinforcing their enduring relevance in contemporary African literature.

The influence of oral tradition on contemporary African literature

Oral tradition has long been a vital part of African culture, playing a central role in the transmission of history, values, and communal wisdom across generations. As African societies transitioned from oral to written forms, many contemporary African writers incorporated elements of oral tradition into their literary works to preserve cultural identities, critique colonial legacies, and explore the complexities of modernity. In literature, oral traditions manifest through storytelling techniques, proverbs, rituals, and communal narratives. The influence of oral tradition is evident in the works of prominent African authors such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Djibril Tamsir Niane and Wole Soyinka. This essay will examine the influence of oral tradition on contemporary African literature, focusing on how it shapes narrative techniques, character development, and social commentary.

Oral tradition has profoundly influenced the narrative structure and thematic concerns of contemporary African literature. African writers often incorporate oral techniques such as repetition, parallelism, and communal storytelling into their novels to create a link between the oral and written worlds. These techniques are not just stylistic choices; they are rooted in African cultural practices, where stories were passed down through generations orally.

First, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the influence of oral tradition is evident throughout the novel. The use of proverbs, folktales, and oral storytelling methods reflects the Igbo culture, where wisdom is conveyed through oral means. Achebe's use of proverbs such as "The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did" (p. 45). This passage demonstrates the Igbo people's reliance on oral narratives to express their beliefs, values, and social norms. This oral influence is integral to the novel's exploration of cultural identity, colonialism, and the clash between tradition and modernity.

Besides, in *Petals of Blood* (1977), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o uses oral storytelling to illustrate the struggles of post-colonial Kenya and the challenges faced by its people. Ngũgĩ blends oral techniques with modern narrative forms, allowing characters to recount personal and collective histories, drawing on their oral

pasts to reflect on their present. This fusion of oral and written storytelling critiques the political and economic exploitation in post-colonial Africa. That is why he states: "The stories we tell ourselves are the ones we believe, but it is the stories that others talk about us that we end up living out." (p. 56). This reflection on the power of narrative illustrates the centrality of oral traditions in shaping identity. In *Petals of Blood*, the characters' oral histories not only reveal their struggles but also point to the influence of external forces (colonialism, capitalism) that reshape their identities.

Secondly, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) draws heavily from Yoruba oral traditions, particularly regarding the role of ritual and communal performance in the cultural fabric of Nigerian society. The play explores the tensions between colonial forces and indigenous African practices, particularly the ritual suicide of the king's horseman, Elesin. Soyinka uses oral traditions as a narrative tool to examine themes of duty, sacrifice, and cultural dissonance in post-colonial Africa. That is why he says: "I am the son of a father who knew no other way but to hold his head high and tell the world what his heart had been told. There are things that will never die. The oral wisdom is one of them." (p.29) This passage emphasizes the enduring power of oral tradition, not just as a form of communication but as a means of spiritual and cultural continuity. In the context of the play, it highlights the critical role oral narratives play in preserving cultural integrity in the face of colonial disruption.

Finally, Oral tradition continues to be a cornerstone of contemporary African literature. In the works of Achebe, Ngũgĩ, and Soyinka, we see how oral traditions transcend their initial oral forms and become integral to written literature. Using proverbs, storytelling, and ritualistic performance, these authors preserve the wisdom and cultural values of their societies while addressing the modern challenges of colonialism, independence, and identity. Oral tradition in contemporary African literature not only serves as a cultural repository but also as a critique of social, political, and moral issues, offering African writers a powerful tool for resistance and reflection. The enduring influence of oral tradition in African literary works demonstrates its continuing relevance in the preservation and transformation of African culture in the modern world.

The function and significance of oral traditions in *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*

Oral traditions are a hallmark of African literature, deeply embedded in its narrative forms. They function as a repository of communal knowledge and are a means of passing down cultural heritage, moral values, and historical narratives. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe employs proverbs, folktales, and communal rituals to evoke the rich cultural life of the Igbo people, illustrating how these oral traditions structure their world. In contrast, *A Man of the People* uses oral tradition to satirize the post-independence political environment, critiquing the erosion of communal values and the rise of individualism. Through these works, Achebe reveals how oral traditions adapt to social and political shifts, highlighting their resilience and fragility in the face of change.

First, in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe uses oral traditions to provide insight into the Igbo worldview. Proverbs are central to the novel, encapsulating wisdom and guiding social interactions. For instance, the saying, "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten," (p.14). This passage underscores the importance of eloquence and shared wisdom in Igbo culture. This is a famous proverb from Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. In the context of the novel and the culture it portrays, proverbs play a significant role in communication. The metaphor of "palm oil" suggests that proverbs add flavor, smoothness, or richness to speech, making it more effective and enjoyable. Palm oil is a key ingredient in many African cuisines, so the comparison highlights how proverbs are essential in conveying meaning, wisdom, and nuance in conversation.

Secondly, in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, oral traditions play a significant role in illuminating the cultural fabric of postcolonial Nigerian society and critiquing its political and moral decline. Unlike

Things Fall Apart, where oral traditions are revered as the foundation of societal values, *A Man of the People* presents them as tools often co-opted and manipulated in the service of corruption and personal gain. This shift reflects the erosion of traditional values and the challenges faced by African societies in balancing modernity with cultural heritage. Oral traditions in the novel appear primarily using proverbs, anecdotes, and storytelling. These elements highlight communal wisdom while exposing how such traditions are misused in a rapidly modernizing society. Chief Nanga, the central political figure, exemplifies this duality. His mastery of traditional oratory makes him a charismatic leader, but he often employs this skill for self-serving ends, using cultural symbols to mask his opportunism. In Chapter 3, Chief Nanga delivers a speech where he says: "Let me tell you what our people say: if you want to eat a toad, you look for a fat and juicy one. We cannot allow these hungry, unpatriotic, self-seeking rascals to divide us." (p.55). This proverb, traditionally symbolizing the idea of making the most of an unpleasant situation, is co-opted by Nanga to justify his greed while deflecting attention from his corrupt practices. He uses the communal resonance of oral traditions to mask his self-interest, aligning himself rhetorically with the people even as his actions betray their trust.

Finally, Oral traditions in *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People* play multifaceted roles, from preserving cultural heritage to critiquing societal change. In *Things Fall Apart*, they anchor the Igbo people's identity, highlighting the richness of their traditions and the trauma of colonial disruption. In *A Man of the People*, oral traditions are both a means of satire and a lament for the moral erosion of postcolonial society. Achebe's nuanced treatment of oral traditions in these novels underscores their enduring relevance, even as they adapt to the shifting tides of history. Through these works, he affirms the vitality of African oral traditions while urging readers to recognize their fragility in the face of change.

The impact of oral tradition on the themes and narratives of contemporary African literature in Things Fall Apart and A Man of the People

Oral traditions are the lifeblood of African storytelling, encompassing proverbs, folktales, songs, and communal practices. These elements serve multiple purposes: they preserve history, transmit moral lessons, and bind communities through shared experiences. Achebe, as one of Africa's literary pioneers, intricately weaves oral traditions into the fabric of his novels, using them to create authentic representations of African life.

In *Things Fall Apart*, oral traditions are central to the narrative, reflecting the values and worldview of the Igbo people and illustrating the devastating impact of colonial disruption. In *A Man of the People*, oral traditions are adapted to critique the corruption and moral decay of post-independence Nigeria. Both novels reveal how oral traditions not only shape individual characters and their interactions but also underscore broader societal themes.

In *A Man of the People*, oral traditions take on a satirical edge, reflecting the tension between communal values and the corruption of post-independence leadership. Chief Nanga, a charismatic yet morally bankrupt politician, manipulates oral traditions to maintain his power. His use of proverbs and rhetorical devices resonates with the people, but it ultimately highlights the disjunction between traditional values and the self-serving opportunism of modern politicians. Chief Nanga declares: "A man who brings home ant-infested faggots should not complain if lizards start to visit him,"(p.59) This passage exposes his ability to use traditional wisdom selectively for personal gain (Chapter 3). This proverb, while culturally resonant, is employed to deflect responsibility, demonstrating how oral traditions can be co-opted.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe uses oral traditions such as proverbs, folktales, and rituals to convey the richness of Igbo culture. Proverbs, describes as "the palm oil with which words are eaten,"(p.14). are a

central feature, encapsulating communal wisdom and guiding interpersonal relations. For instance, he says: “*When the moon is shining, the cripple becomes hungry for a walk*” (p.74). This passage reflects the Igbo people's deep connection to nature and their symbolic worldview. This proverb suggests that when opportunities or inspiration arise, even those who face significant challenges or limitations feel a surge of motivation or desire to act. The moonlight symbolizes an enticing or uplifting moment, while the "cripple" represents someone constrained or hindered by circumstances. It highlights the human tendency to yearn for action or fulfillment when conditions seem favorable, despite previous barriers. Ultimately, it speaks to the power of hope and opportunity to awaken latent desires

One can say that while *Things Fall Apart* portrays oral traditions as a foundation of cultural identity and cohesion, *A Man of the People* highlights their vulnerability in a changing world. In both novels, oral traditions serve as a narrative anchor, linking the personal to the communal and the past to the present. However, their functions differ: in the former, they are a lament for a lost way of life, and in the latter, a critique of societal transformation.

Finally, Oral traditions significantly shape the themes and narratives of *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*, underscoring their enduring relevance in contemporary African literature. In *Things Fall Apart*, they are a testament to the richness of pre-colonial African culture and a marker of its disruption by colonialism. In *A Man of the People*, they become a vehicle for satire, reflecting the challenges of modernity and the moral decline of postcolonial society. Achebe's use of oral traditions in these novels highlights their dual role as a source of cultural resilience and a barometer of societal change, affirming their importance in understanding Africa's literary and historical landscape.

The role of oral tradition in preserving African cultural identity within contemporary literature in Things Fall Apart and A Man of the People

Oral tradition plays a critical role in preserving African cultural identity, particularly in the face of colonial disruption and modernity. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, oral traditions such as proverbs, folktales, and communal rituals are central to the depiction of Igbo society. These elements serve as vessels for cultural knowledge, moral instruction, and historical continuity, reflecting the depth and complexity of pre-colonial African life. For instance, the frequent use of proverbs, Chinua Achebe says: "A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness,"(p.23). This passage underscores the importance of respect and reciprocity within Igbo culture. These proverbs serve as a linguistic bridge that connects generations, ensuring that cultural values remain intact despite external challenges. This statement emphasizes the importance of showing respect to those who have achieved greatness or hold esteemed positions. By honoring others, an individual not only demonstrates humility but also creates opportunities to learn from their experiences and wisdom. It suggests that respect is reciprocal; by uplifting others, one builds relationships that can lead to personal growth and success. Ultimately, it reflects the idea that recognition of others' accomplishments is a steppingstone to achieving one's own greatness.

Oral traditions are a cornerstone of African cultural identity, serving as vehicles for transmitting history, values, and collective memory. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe intricately weaves proverbs, folktales, and communal rituals into the narrative, presenting them as vital to the Igbo society's cohesion and worldview. Similarly, in *A Man of the People*, oral traditions emerge as tools of expression, though often manipulated in the political context of post-independence Nigeria. Both novels use oral traditions to explore the challenges of cultural preservation and adaptation in the face of historical disruptions such as colonialism and modernization.

In *Things Fall Apart*, oral traditions are depicted as essential to the survival and flourishing of Igbo identity. Proverbs, described as “the palm oil with which words are eaten,” serve as concise expressions

of wisdom, guiding personal behavior and community relationships. For example, the saying "A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing," (p.66). It conveys a deeper understanding of cause and effect, emphasizing the importance of inquiry in decision-making. These proverbs are used throughout the novel to reinforce communal values and to frame the narrative within a distinctly Igbo epistemology. Achebe's use of these oral elements underscores their role in defining cultural identity and sustaining social order.

Folktales in *Things Fall Apart* also play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage. Ekwefi's story of the tortoise and the birds (Chapter 11) illustrates how oral storytelling conveys moral lessons to younger generations while fostering a sense of communal belonging. The tale warns against greed and deception, reflecting the moral framework of Igbo society. This moment of storytelling between Ekwefi and her daughter, Ezinma, captures the intergenerational transmission of cultural values, emphasizing the significance of oral tradition as a means of continuity. However, the novel also demonstrates how the disruption of these traditions by colonial forces contributes to the fragmentation of Igbo identity, symbolized by Okonkwo's personal and societal downfall.

In *A Man of the People*, oral traditions take on a different tone, reflecting the evolving dynamics of cultural identity in postcolonial Nigeria. While Achebe continues to emphasize their significance, the novel critiques how these traditions are manipulated in a modern political context. Chief Nanga's use of proverbs, such as "He who has diarrhea knows the direction of the door without being told,"(p.72). This passage illustrates his ability to exploit cultural forms of expression to maintain his power. These proverbs, while resonating with the masses, are stripped of their original moral intent and used for rhetorical convenience. This distortion highlights the erosion of communal values in a society grappling with corruption and moral decay.

Despite this critique, *A Man of the People* suggests that oral traditions remain a source of cultural continuity even in times of change. Odili, the narrator, uses anecdotes and traditional sayings to reflect on the contradictions of modernity and tradition, showing how oral traditions adapt to new contexts. For instance, his observations on Chief Nanga's opportunism are framed within the language of traditional wisdom, allowing Achebe to contrast the potential of oral traditions as a tool for moral critique with their misuse by the corrupt elite. This tension reflects the broader struggle to preserve cultural identity in a rapidly transforming society.

Achebe's portrayal of oral traditions in both novels demonstrates their centrality to African cultural identity, even as they are challenged by colonialism and modernization. In *Things Fall Apart*, oral traditions embody the vibrancy and complexity of Igbo culture, standing as a testament to its pre-colonial integrity. In *A Man of the People*, they reflect the resilience of African identity while also critiquing the forces that undermine their authenticity. Together, these works highlight the dual role of oral traditions as both a repository of cultural heritage and a site of contestation in contemporary African literature.

CONCLUSION

In *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*, Chinua Achebe masterfully illustrates the enduring significance of oral tradition in contemporary African literature. These oral elements proverbs, folktales, and communal expressions not only preserve African cultural identity but also serve as tools for critique, adaptation, and reflection. In *Things Fall Apart*, oral traditions embody the richness of pre-colonial Igbo society, acting as a medium for transmitting values, history, and communal wisdom. Achebe uses these traditions to mourn the cultural erosion brought about by colonialism, demonstrating how their loss undermines identity and social cohesion.

In contrast, *A Man of the People* depicts oral traditions in a postcolonial context, highlighting their flexibility and resilience. However, the novel also critiques how these traditions can be manipulated in a morally compromised society. Through the satirical lens of political rhetoric, Achebe explores the tension between preserving cultural authenticity and adapting to modernity. This duality underscores the challenges African societies face in navigating the complexities of cultural heritage in the modern era.

Together, the two novels reveal the multifaceted role of oral tradition in contemporary African literature: as a bridge between past and present, a repository of identity, and a platform for social commentary. Achebe's works affirm that oral traditions remain vital to the African literary canon, offering a lens to understand and negotiate the changes that define the continent's historical and cultural landscape. By preserving and transforming these traditions, African literature continues to assert its identity while addressing the universal struggles of adaptation, resilience, and renewal.

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