

# The Use of Food Imagery and Representation of Culture in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*

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## **Abstract:**

*This paper is an attempt— to critically analyse the food and food habits of the Igbo society, to understand how the dominant discourses of the society shape the symbolic significance of or meanings associated with food, and in the process to examine the use of food imageries and its relation to the representation of culture in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) and A Man of the People (1966). The two novels have been selected for study, to highlight the changes that came into the Igbo food habits and subsequently to its culture during the Igbo society's transition from pre-colonial to the post-colonial era. Achebe's Things Fall Apart is set in the pre-colonial times, when the Igbo society was beginning to come into contact with the British coloniser's culture, whereas the setting of A Man of the People is post-independent Nigeria. This paper argues that food imagery is a significant trope used by Achebe to represent and critique the Igbo culture in his fictions. The methodology used in the paper involves a close reading of the primary texts and an exploration of relevant criticisms on the theme of food and culture in Achebe's fiction. The ideas on food and culture that emanates from a reading of Achebe's fictions, and the stance of African critics like— F. Abiola Irele, Harry Olufunwa, Christopher Anyokwo and Ifi Amadiume on those themes, serve as a theoretical frame of reference in examining the texts, and in establishing a relationship between food and culture in those fictions.*

**Keywords:** Food, culture, tradition, beliefs, power, discourse, social status.

Food and food habits are integral to the culture of society for they provide an identity to that society. It offers a crucial lens to view and understand the characteristic cultural traits of a society. Igbo society depicted in Chinua Achebe's fictions is no exception to that rule. The availability of food or kinds of food in a geographical area is determined by nature. However, the meanings associated with, or the symbolic significance of, the food is determined by the dominant discourses of the society. This paper is an attempt— to critically analyse the food and food habits of the Igbo society, to understand how the dominant discourses of the society shape the symbolic significance of or meanings associated with food, and in the process to examine the use of food imageries and its relation to the representation of culture in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *A Man of the People* (1966). The two novels have been selected for study, to highlight the changes that came into the Igbo food habits and subsequently to its culture during the Igbo society's transition from pre-colonial to the post-colonial era. Stuart Hall asseverates that "cultural identity" is in a constant state of flux, it keeps changing. Referring to Hall's statement one may claim that the food habits of the Igbos, that was so integral to their cultural identity, was bound to change with time and space. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is set in the pre-colonial times, when the Igbo society was beginning to come into contact with the British coloniser's culture, whereas the setting of *A Man of the People* is post-independent

Nigeria. This paper argues that food imagery is a significant trope used by Achebe to represent and critique the Igbo culture in his fictions.

In the essay “Eating with Kings: Food and Ambition in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” Harry Olufunwa examines the various meanings food, eating, and hunger acquire in the portrayal of Okonkwo, the protagonist of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Shirin Edwin in “Subverting Social Customs: The Representation of Food in Three West African Francophone Novels” tries to highlight the social symbolism and meanings associated with food, eating habits, and culinary customs in West African societies. In the essay “Culture in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” Diana Akers Rhoads shows how food imagery is integral to many Igbo proverbs and how these proverbs are significant to the Igbo life and society. Christopher Anyokwo in “Re-Imagining Gender in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” examines the relationship between food and gender. In the chapter titled “Transforming Hunger into Power: Food and Resistance in Nigerian Literature”<sup>1</sup> Jenni Ramone emphasises the significance of commensality<sup>2</sup> to Igbo society and attributes colonialism for the undoing of commensality from that society. In the book *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* F. Abiola Irele highlights the centrality of the yam to the Igbo culture and delineates the meanings associated with it. A review of literature on the theme of food and culture in the novels of Achebe reveals that very little research has been done so far in this area. Some research has been carried out taking up the themes of food and culture individually or separately, however, there seems to be a dearth of research examining the relationship between the two. This paper is an attempt to critically examine and establish the relationship between food and culture in the novels of Achebe.

Sense of community is a vital cultural trait of the Igbo community depicted in the novels of Achebe. Food is an indispensable component of almost all major Igbo customs and festivities. The food habits of the Igbos, largely, are instrumental in generating and sustaining the community feelings among the Igbos. The feast of New Yam was very significant to the Igbo community. It was held every year before the harvest began, to honour the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan. The earnestness with which the Igbos celebrated the New Yam festival suggested the kind of respect they had for the earth goddess and their ancestral spirits. The Igbos regarded Ani, the earth goddess, to be the source of all fertility. This suggests how food and fertility were very integral to the Igbo culture. Almost every special occasion among the Igbos, like marriage, acquiring a title etc. was marked by feasting. Such feastings provided a platform for the people of the community to come together and exchange their feelings. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo offers a feast to his mother’s people to show his gratitude to them for sheltering him for seven years. He humbly tells them, “I have only called you together because it is good for kinsmen to meet” (*TFA* 119). In “Subverting Social Customs: The Representation of Food in Three West African Francophone Novels” Shirin Edwin, emphasising the importance of eating together, has rightly pointed out that the feastings, where people shared food, were instrumental in fostering and strengthening the already existing social and political ties, and networks among the people. Mbiti very well encapsulates the sense of community of the Igbos through these lines, “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti 141).

Igbo society was a polygamous society where a man had multiple wives. It is interesting to note that the children of the different wives of the family often shared food. When a mother was unable to cook food, her children would be fed by the other wives of the family. This act of sharing food enhanced the bonding between the children of the family. Further, the children in addition to their mother regarded all the other wives of their father as their own mother. Referring to the bonding the children shared with their mothers Buchi Emecheta, in “Feminism with a Small ‘f’!”, shares the anecdote where the small son of one of her group-members in London told his teacher that he had two

mummies. “My Mummy number one is working. Mummy number two will come and collect me” (555). The teacher did not understand until she realised that the boy’s father had two wives. In *Things Fall Apart* when Ojiugo, the youngest wife of Okonkwo, goes to plait her hair in her friend’s house and does not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal, her children were invited to eat “with the children of his [Okonkwo’s] first wife” (TFA 21).

The Igbo society, depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, had a gendered division of crops. Yam, the king of crops was regarded as a man’s crop, while coco-yams, cassava, and beans were regarded as women’s crops. The narrator says, “Yam the King of crops, was a very exacting king. For three or four moons it demanded hard work and constant attention from cock crow till the chickens went back to roost” (TFA 24). The amount of masculine energy involved in the cultivation of Yam perhaps made it a man’s crop. In “Re-Imagining Gender in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” Christopher Anyokwu very distinctly highlights the gendered division of crops in Umuofia. He agrees to the narrator of *Things Fall Apart* who claimed that in Umuofia yam stood for manliness and one who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was regarded a great man. Further, cultivation of food crops in the distant wild forests, in virgin land, conferred masculinity to the person involved. In *Things Fall Apart* Chika, the priestess reprimands Unoka for his laziness and explains to him the reason for his failure. She tells him that he failed because did not dare to work like a man. When his neighbours went out with their axe to cut down virgin forests, he sowed his yams on exhausted farms that took no labour to clear (13).

In the Igbo society in *Things Fall Apart* yam was a symbol of power and social status. More the number of barns full of yams a man had, the greater was his social status. The narrator of *Things Fall Apart* proclaims the success of Okonkwo: “He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife” (TFA 6). The traditional Umuofian society was agrarian, there a man who had more barns was acknowledged to be capable of feeding more wives, hence could marry many wives. His wives and their offsprings eventually would assist him in his farming and thereby increase his chances of prospering more. Moreover, in “Eating with Kings: Food and Ambition in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” Harry Olufunwa emphasises the fact that Okonkwo’s skills were quintessentially physical—wrestling, farming, and war; all the three activities were organically connected to food. Food and farming are interconnected. Farming is a physically demanding activity that requires strength, skill, and endurance to produce food. Again, food will provide the necessary nutrition and strength required for farming. Okonkwo understood the importance and value of both food and farming to be successful, and that was perhaps the reason why he could succeed at a young age.

Among the Igbos, foods like kola nut and palm wine have religious significance. The Igbos have their personal god and they worship their ancestral spirits. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo worshipped his personal god and his ancestral spirits “with sacrifices of kola nut, food, and palm wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children” (TFA 10). Breaking of kola nut was regarded auspicious in the negotiation of marriage, as it marked the beginning of a new relationship between two families. When the bridegroom’s family came to marry Obierika’ daughter, the latter offered kola nuts to his in-laws. While breaking the first kola nut Obierika’s eldest brother wished, “Life to all of us, and let there be friendship between your family and ours” (TFA 84).

The Igbo society gave great emphasis on oratorical skills and food. There are an ample number of Igbo proverbs having food imageries that provide universal wisdom. The narrator in *Things Fall Apart* emphasising how highly the Igbos regarded the art of conversation mentions that for them “proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (TFA 5). As palm-oil is integral to the process

of eating, it facilitates the act of eating, in the same way, dexterous choice and use of words help one to express or convey his/her thoughts and feelings in a lucid manner. Among the Igbos, hard work was revered more than age and birth. In *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo was not born in a wealthy family. However, by his hard work and diligence he, at a very young age, was able to attain fame and success. The narrator informs that Okonkwo at a young age had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer who “had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife (TFA 6). The appreciation of Okonkwo’s hard work and success is very well encapsulated in the Igbo proverb, “if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings” (TFA 6). In other words, if a person worked hard diligently it was certain s/he would be successful. The Igbos respected industry and success, however, they abhorred arrogance in a man. In *Things Fall Apart* an old man condemning Okonkwo’s arrogance and the brusqueness with which he dealt with less successful men exclaims, “Looking at a king’s mouth, one would think he never sucked at his mother’s breast” (TFA 19).

In *A Man of the People*, Achebe uses the phrase “national cake” in a sarcastic manner. It is used to suggest the selfishness and greed of the native leaders of post-independent Nigeria. Those leaders, instead of contributing to the development of the nation, were exploiting its riches. Imitating their leaders, the common people too were looking for ways to exploit the national resources. However, the priorities of the two were different, the native leaders wanted to loot the national exchequer to become richer, while the common mass desired amenities like clean water to drink, good roads, and electricity supply etc. If the common people received those then they were contented thinking that they have received their share of the national cake.

A reading of Achebe’s two novels *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People* shows that with the changing times certain changes have come to the food habits and the meanings associated with the food habits of the Igbos. In the book titled *Chinua Achebe*, C. L Innes places before us the feelings Achebe had, growing up at Ogidi in the thirties. Achebe describes his experience as living “at the crossroads of culture”<sup>3</sup>. Achebe elaborates, “On one arm of the cross we sang hymns and read the bible night and day. On the other my father’s brother and his family, blinded by heathenism, offered food to idols” (*Chinua Achebe* 4). The practise of offering food to their personal god and ancestors which was a characteristic trait of the traditional Igbo religious beliefs are now regarded as an uncivilised or a heathen practice. One can notice that the prominent food imageries used in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* were yam, palm-wine, cassava, and beans etc., however, in *A Man of the People* the prominent food imagery used is cake. The movement from yam to the cake is indicative of the transformation that had come to the Igbo society in its transition from pre-colonial to postcolonial times. It is suggestive of the native elite’s tendency to reject their traditional beliefs, and blindly imitate the western values and practices. The native Igbo leaders of the newly independent Nigerian nation, in particular, tend to put on, in Fanon’s phrase, a “white masks”<sup>4</sup> over their black skins. However, Fanon believes that such an effort on the part of the natives to blindly imitate the west will turn out to be futile and disastrous.

In the traditional Igbo society shown in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* social feasting was an occasion and a medium to enhance community feelings among the people. Food, in that society, literally served the purpose of satiating one’s hunger. However, in the modern Igbo society depicted in Achebe’s *A Man of the People* feasting has become an occasion for demonstrating one’s social class and status, instead of bringing unity among people it only serves to widen the social gap between people based on class and status. Food now instead of remaining a metaphor for nutrition has become a symbol of extravagance. In Achebe’s *A Man of the People*, Mrs Nanga sarcastically points out to Odili about

embassy parties, “ ‘What can you enjoy there?’ she asked with great spirit. ‘Nine pence talk and three pence food. ‘Hallo, hawa you. Nice to see you again.’ All na lie lie’ ” (AMOP 36).

However, with the changing times, from pre-colonial to the postcolonial, the Igbo natives’ attitude towards cooking and gender has not changed conspicuously. In Achebe’s *A Man of the People* the cook who came in search of work to Naga’s place informed the latter that he was proficient in cooking European dishes, however, he declared that he did not know how to cook native food. He unhesitatingly mentioned that it was unmanly and a shameful thing to cook local native food, for he believed that cooking such food was the job of a woman. Odili theorising the cook’s attitude towards foreign food and the act of cooking says: “As long as a man confined himself to preparing foreign concoctions he could still maintain the comfortable illusion that he wasn’t really doing such an unmanly thing as cooking” (AMOP 47).

An analysis of the food and food habits of the Igbo societies depicted in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People* enables one to realise the social significance of the food imageries, and also to understand how dominant social discourses are instrumental in defining meanings to those food imageries. In the traditional Igbo society in *Things Fall Apart* feasting was a medium to enhance community feelings among the people. However, in the post-independent Nigerian nation depicted in *A Man of the People* feasting is more a symbol of extravagance. Instead of enhancing community feelings, it widens the gap between people based on social class and status. A barn full of yams was a symbol of power in the traditional Igbo society, however, in the post-independent Igbo society material wealth has become a symbol of power. However, with this transition from pre-colonial to post-colonial times, there was no conspicuous change in the Igbo societies attitude towards food and gender. The natives of post-independent Nigeria still consider cooking to be an unmanly activity, a domain for the women to take care of. Thus, one may conclude that Achebe through the use of food imageries has been able to effectively represent and critique the Igbo culture in his fictions.

#### **Notes:**

1. This essay appears in the book *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food* edited by Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee.
2. Commensality may broadly be understood as the social custom of eating and drinking together. It is instrumental in creating and cementing relationships. However, it also sets boundaries, including or excluding people according to a set of criteria defined by society.
3. Refer to C. L. Innes book titled *Chinua Achebe*, page no. 4.
4. Refer to Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*.

#### **Abbreviations used:**

*Things Fall Apart*: TFA

*A Man of the People*: AMOP

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