

Original Article

Culturally Embedded Beliefs and the Society in Achebe's "The Sacrificial Egg"

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Abstract - Chinua Achebe's short story "The Sacrificial Egg" intricately weaves a narrative that interrogates the dialectical tensions between indigenous African cosmologies and the epistemological disruptions engendered by Western modernity. Through the figure of Julius Obi-a Western-educated clerk oscillating between rationalist skepticism and cultural inheritance-the story problematizes the linearity of civilizational progress and exposes the ontological entanglements inherent in postcolonial identity formation. Set against the backdrop of an epidemic that metaphorically and materially fractures the socio-economic fabric of Umuru, Achebe re-inscribes the sacred within the quotidian through culturally embedded symbols such as the titular sacrificial egg. Drawing from critical insights on cultural hybridity and meaning-making politics, this article explores how the story mobilizes Igbo oral traditions, symbolic spatiality, and linguistic situatedness to foreground the persistence of belief systems that modernity ostensibly seeks to efface. Rather than positing a binary between the traditional and the modern, Achebe's narrative discloses the psychic dissonance and affective ambivalence experienced by postcolonial subjects as they navigate a terrain of conflicting ontologies. In doing so, the story resists essentialist readings of culture and instead articulates a nuanced vision of hybridity as both rupture and synthesis, disorder and continuity.

Keywords - Essential, Culture, Conflict, Western, Society.

1. Introduction

Chinua Achebe's short story *The Sacrificial Egg* dramatises the clash between indigenous Igbo traditions and the disruptive force of Western colonial modernity. Achebe, a central voice in African literature, consistently used fiction to explore how imperialism reshaped African societies while preserving local belief systems. In this story, he portrays Umuru, a village once sustained by ritual, community, and commerce, but now unsettled by colonial intervention-the marketplace-once the vibrant heart of Umuru-symbolizes this cultural transformation. Western trade and ideology infiltrate daily life, yet ancestral beliefs continue to shape how villagers interpret events. When smallpox spreads through the community, people do not frame it as a medical epidemic but as the work of Kitikpa, the terrifying deity of disease. In Achebe's hands, this collision of explanations reveals the persistence of spirituality and myth even under the weight of colonial "progress." What remains is a portrait of hybridity a society suspended between traditional cosmologies and the rationalizing force of the West. Achebe shows that while colonialism disrupts and reorders village life, it cannot erase the deep cultural memory and spiritual framework that continue to guide the people of Umuru. Julius Obi sat gazing at his typewriter. The fat Chief Clerk, his boss, was snoring at his table. Outside, the gatekeeper in his green uniform was sleeping at his post. You couldn't blame him; no customer had passed through the gate for nearly a week. There was an empty basket on the giant weighing machine. A few palm-kernels lay desolately in the dust around the machine. Only the flies remained in strength...Who would have believed the great boisterous market could be quenched like this?



But such was the strength of Kitikpa, the incarnate power of smallpox. Only he could drive away all those people and leave the market to the flies. (Achebe, 2013, pp. 41-43) This paper explores how Achebe's "The Sacrificial Egg" portrays the socio-cultural impact of epidemics, marked by death, grief, and economic collapse. The very thought of an epidemic evokes fear, for it almost always trails countless corpses in its wake. Achebe emphasizes that such devastation is inescapable. As Adekunle Mamudu notes, epidemics bring profound suffering upon communities: "This suffering may take physical, psychological, or emotional forms, and in the stories under study, none of these dimensions of pain is absent" (Mamudu, 2020, p. 241). In Achebe's story, this pain takes shape through loneliness, disconnection, and despair. Mamudu characterizes the plague as a monstrous force, merciless in its grip, one that unravels social bonds, shatters communal life, and leaves the community haunted and diminished beneath its shadow:

He came in confident knowledge of the terror he held over the people. He was an evil deity and boasted of it. Lest he be offended, those he killed were not killed but decorated, and no one dared weep for them. He put an end to the coming and going between neighbours and between villages. They said 'Kitikpa was in that village' and that it was immediately cut off by its neighbours. (Achebe, 2013, p. 45) Villages distanced themselves from one another, their previously strong connections of kinship broken. At the slightest mention of "Kitikpa," spirits plunged into hopelessness, cloaked in the fear of demise. The illness, envisioned as a ferocious man-eater, was considered a divine retribution-an all-powerful force to which everyone must submit in terror and respect.

In its threatening presence, individuals and communities withdrew into seclusion, eager to escape its deadly arrival. This retreat fostered the pain of parting from cherished individuals, the empty loneliness of broken bonds, and the gradual choking of liberty-the liberty to travel, to congregate, and to partake in the basic pleasure of human presence. Although academics have discussed the psychological impacts of pandemics as a 'fearsome phenomenon,' disturbing social cohesion and fostering isolation, little focus has been given to how such characterizations challenge sophisticated colonial medical practices in African literature. This article aims to address the research gap by examining how "The Sacrificial Egg," as a central text, uncovers the inherent relationship between the concept of pandemic and cultural norms. This paper argues that Achebe's narratives ought to be interpreted not only as fictional and superstitious tales but as a convergence of contemporary science, spirituality, and wellness. When viewed through the lens of intersectionality, his narratives appear to critique the Eurocentric evaluation of African culture and knowledge.

2. Culture: Outdated Vs Traditional Norms

Mamudu's (2020) interpretation of Achebe's "The Sacrificial Egg" highlights the story's stark depiction of a community disintegrating due to the burden of an epidemic. He observes that Achebe depicts this downfall with striking clarity, interweaving throughout the narrative the distressing visuals of extensive mortality, emotional turmoil, the bleakness of isolation, the dissolution of community bonds, and the slow erosion of economic strength. The researcher, however, aims to present a somewhat distinct viewpoint that highlights how ingrained traditional beliefs persist in influencing society, even in the life of a missionary-educated character like Julius, who sees these customs as remnants of superstition.

Keen to adopt the contemporary values and practices of the West, Julius wishes to abandon these traditions. However, his dreams are crushed by a heartbreak event that compels him to reevaluate the value of Western principles. At that moment, he feels urged to rely again on the traditions and beliefs of his forebears' faith. Similar to Julius Obi, the younger Umuru generation discarded traditional customs, deeming them outdated amid the tide of Westernization-a force that gradually dismantled the village's cultural identity. People such as Obi found themselves trapped between the enduring heritage of Igbo customs and the alluring, yet foreign, modernity of the West. Following the incident, Julius-despite appearing westernized-reconnects with the cultural heritage he previously tried to leave behind.

Achebe's narrative thus serves as a fascinating exploration of cultural hybridity, where identity is shaped in the conflict between tradition and modernity. In a textual analysis of Mr. Bamane Amit Maruti and Dr. Ghorpade Pradnya Vijay on Achebe's "The Sacrificial Egg", they come to the conclusion that: Throughout the story, Chinua Achebe has disclosed the integrity of tradition. Though he has a modern approach to changing the scenario of the traditional African society, he does not discredit the tradition itself, but rather those who administer it. He has exposed how the young African generation came across the foreign culture. Africans were highly influenced by Western culture and neglected their original one. This dualism in Julius's mind has been uncovered by Achebe. (Maruti & Vijay, 2014, p. 08).

This concept aligns perfectly with Sherma's (2025) observations in Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," where Sonny, the narrator's brother, strives to counter the influence of Western culture. Regrettably, he must perform "Am I Blue?" written by a white fellow artist, which signifies two things: it is unfeasible to simplify a tradition, or the merging of cultures is a final objective. Additionally, Reno (2025) links religious and cultural essentialism, as the characters' thoughts and actions are influenced by a divine force. He progresses by "interpreting 'The Sacrificial Egg' as a story of cultural disorientation, suggesting that the characters function within a consistent and ongoing perspective rooted in religious and cultural essentialism." Their decisions indicate not dislocation, but a spiritual connection to Igbo cosmology, where rituals, ancestral spirits, and divine justice hold moral significance" (p. 162).

Achebe's writings are frequently seen as a challenge to Western dominance or Eurocentrism, illustrating the susceptibility of indigenous values. Chang (2021) contends that "the presence of both local and Western lifestyles in this specific narrative fails to encourage the blending of various cultural values" (p. 151), yet Julius Obi, a Western character, recognizes the importance of African cultural traditions, despite their seeming uncivilized nature to Western perspectives. Opondio (2021) asserts that the connections between humans and non-human forces illustrate how traditional and spiritual knowledge coexist alongside the upheavals brought about by colonial authority, religious conversion, and social transformation in Umuru. "The Sacrificial Egg highlights the intertwining of human and non-human entities, illustrating a society where blended knowledge and practices coexist with colonial rule, conversion, and the disturbance of daily life in Umuru" (p. 161).

3. Solution: Cultural Hybridity

Numerous critics analyze "The Sacrificial Egg" through the perspective of cultural hybridity, noting how Achebe's story illustrates the intricate blending of various identities. Here, cultural hybridity represents the merging, negotiation, and occasionally, conflict of different traditions-especially the interaction between African heritage and Western impact. While the concept of multiculturalism, based on respecting the distinctiveness of ethnic, religious, and cultural identities, was never completely established in African philosophy, the continent has historically been a vibrant mosaic of diverse and pluralistic communities. Achebe's story highlights the intense conflict between the lasting essence of native African customs and the unsettling, often dislocating, influences of colonial modernity. Julius Obi, influenced by colonial educational systems, experiences a conflict between the rational principles of the West and the spiritual customs rooted in his Igbo heritage. His internal conflict reflects the psychological fragmentation and cultural discord caused by colonial domination. A connected, yet distinctly nuanced view on cultural negotiation-applied to various culturally diverse texts-is presented by Chelya Kanaganayakam in Postcolonial Text:

Cultures are not static; they are certainly not monolithic. But they function on the basis of shared assumptions. They draw their value from oral and literary traditions. Communicating a sense of cultural specificity without slipping into an essentialist position is central to what we do and how we approach text. (Kanaganayaka, 2005) Therefore, meaning is not formed or comprehended by assigning it to a singular, unchangeable interpretation; instead, it arises through a process of signification that develops within the distance, gap, or silence mentioned earlier.

Since culture relies on common assumptions-beliefs shaped by both oral and written traditions-it stands to reason that readers play a vital role in this ongoing process. In this light, culture thrives through the shared perceptions of its audience, welcoming not just those deeply rooted in its context but also readers who find that cultural landscape mostly foreign. The meaning and implications of culturally rooted words and expressions are influenced by the particular contexts in which they occur. Achebe's short story "The Sacrificial Egg" provides a strong argument for investigating how meaning functions within this "situated-ness" and through the process of reading itself (Shrivastava & Nayak, 2014). In the story, words like Eke, Oye, and Afo-firmly embedded in Igbo tradition-become clear to the audience exclusively through their contextual setting, as seen in the phrase:

"This market, although still referred to as 'Nkwo', had long expanded into 'Eke', 'Oye' and 'Afo' with the arrival of modernization and the town's evolution into a significant palm-oil port." In this context, the words emerge as market names, their cultural significance conveyed through the sentence's experienced context. Shrivastava and Nayak ultimately determine that...By analyzing Achebe's chosen short stories rooted in Igbo culture, this article demonstrates that even a reader who is not acquainted with the 'nuances' of a culture can understand meaning from the context offered by the text's language.

"The understanding gained in this way integrates into the knowledge of the reader when it is viewed alongside the broader socio-cultural context that shapes the creation of a text" (Achebe, 2013, p. 76). In other words, this article shows that readers, even if unfamiliar with Igbo culture, can understand culturally specific elements in Achebe's short stories through contextual clues in the language. When these meanings are connected to the broader socio-cultural background of the text, they become part of the reader's knowledge. The researcher's reading of Achebe's 'The Sacrificial Egg' draws attention towards the following lines:

He did not go straight home because he desperately wanted to cling to this strange parting, even alone. Being educated, he was not afraid of whom he might meet, so he went to the bank of the river and just walked up and down it. He must have been there long because he was still there the night mask sounded. He immediately set out for home, half-walking and half-running, for night-masks were not a matter of superstition; they were real. The moon was not yet up..... In this half-light, he saw that he had stepped on an egg offered in sacrifice..... He wiped the sole of his foot on the sandy path and hurried away, carrying another vague worry in his mind. (Achebe, 2013, pp. 47-48) In the text above, it is clear that after treading on a sacrificial egg, Julius-despite his knowledge-cannot break free from superstition, moving in a frantic manner, part running, part walking, with an indistinct feeling of fear overshadowing his thoughts. Influenced by Western education, he experiences a disconnection between two realms:

The traditional culture he was born into and the Western values that have been imposed on him. This meeting forces him to reconsider the basic principles of his education. Colonialism's influence has created in him a deep sense of cultural struggle. Although his education earns him a role as a clerk in a European trading firm, it also alienates him from his cultural heritage. He dismisses the warnings of the villagers, failing to understand their true significance. Despite his rural background, Julius is transformed by Western education, distancing himself from his ancestors' traditions and representing the struggle between cultural heritage and colonial modernity's demands.

4. Discussion

Achebe's tale "The Sacrificial Egg" celebrates indigenous wisdom and critiques the dominance of Western culture. Every culture is deeply connected to individuals' historical experiences and their forebears. Cultures hold historical importance. This study's analysis provides a more comprehensive and intersectional insight into Achebe's The Sacrificial Egg than earlier interpretations that focused solely on cultural hybridity or psychological dissonance.

Though earlier researchers like Mamudu (2020) and Maruti & Vijay (2014) have examined the impact of the epidemic and the spiritual resilience found in traditional belief systems, this paper enhances the discussion by framing the epidemic as both a metaphor for cultural disruption and a vital perspective that uncovers the shortcomings of colonial modernity. By highlighting the symbolic and psychological significance of the sacrificial egg, this research emphasizes that cultural beliefs endure not simply as superstitions but as an epistemological lens through which individuals such as Julius make sense of crisis, loss, and uncertainty. In contrast to current interpretations that view traditional beliefs and modernity as opposing forces, this perspective considers Achebe's narrative as a venue for ontological negotiation-where belief, fear, and reason exist together in delicate harmony.

Additionally, this paper enhances interpretive clarity by placing Achebe's narrative within a triadic framework that intersects modern science, spirituality, and cultural epistemology-an aspect frequently lacking in previous critiques. Although Chang (2021) and Oondo (2021) examined hybridity and syncretism, they do not explore how indigenous cosmology undermines colonial medicine and rationality within the text. This research offers a complex perspective that contests the simplistic distinction between rational and superstitious by demonstrating that Julius's Western education does not protect him from culturally ingrained fear or doubt. Stepping on the sacrificial egg embodies an instant of knowledge breakdown and cultural shift, showing the inadequacy of colonial frameworks to overwrite deep-seated cultural memory. Thus, this analysis not only broadens the discourse on postcolonial identity but also asserts that the resilience of traditional African knowledge systems offers a counter-narrative to Western epistemological dominance-something underexplored in the state-of-the-art literature.

5. Conclusion

Chinua Achebe's "The Sacrificial Egg" serves as a profound commentary on the uncomfortable interaction between African customs and the encroaching power of Western impact. Achebe uses the character of Julius Obi to illustrate a person ensnared in cultural turmoil-shaped by Western education, but still connected to the spiritual and ancestral traditions of his Igbo heritage. The story shows that, despite being regarded as simple superstition by contemporary thought, traditional beliefs still hold significant sway over both individuals and communities. The smallpox outbreak and the act of treading on "The Sacrificial Egg" reveal the boundaries of modernity:

No degree of education or familiarity with Western customs can completely disconnect one from their cultural heritage. Achebe's intentional choice of words and vividly constructed environments, interlaced with culturally rooted phrases and traces of oral tradition, underscores the lasting power and persistence of native belief systems. Though scholars frequently interpret the narrative as a representation of cultural hybridity, it also reveals the psychological and emotional upheaval that this hybridity creates. Julius's internal struggle reflects a broader societal issue, where the quest for modernity is persistently balanced by the lasting influence of ancestral knowledge. Ultimately, Achebe asserts that the past cannot be easily erased; the identity of postcolonial African societies arises not from clear-cut oppositions, but from the complex, often uncomfortable coexistence of tradition and modernity.

Data Availability

This statement should describe how readers can access the data supporting the conclusions of the study and clearly outline the reasons why unavailable data cannot be released.

Authors' Contributions

The author wrote the draft, edited, and revised it.

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