

# The Historical Antecedents of the Ikemefuna Story in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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**Abstract** Few critical works have been produced aimed at discovering the sources for Achebe's novels and how he has adapted the factual materials to create his fiction. Understandably, it is difficult to do a source study of works of an iconic writer such as Achebe. The present study sets out to re-examine the story of Okonkwo and Ikemefuna in view of a similar incident that happened about the same period and in the same area in which *Things Fall Apart* is set. The objective is to underscore the relevance of literature in chronicling and disseminating the socio-cultural values and ideals of the societies that were confronted with the challenges of colonialism in the wake of the twentieth century. Consequently, an actual incident that took place between two neighbouring communities to Achebe's home community is here analyzed as the possible source for the Okonkwo and Ikemefuna narrative in *Things Fall Apart*. The two incidents are analyzed along the lines of the location and period of the action; the key characters involved; the murder and the reparation process. Explanations are based on some aspects of Igbo customs and traditions. The historical incident provides some details that are missing from the novel. The task in this essay is to identify the parallels between the historical incident and the recreation in the story but with a particular focus on history, location/setting and characterization. However, the names of the historical actors are masked because their descendants are still alive and related to one of the researchers.

**Keywords** Kolanut; source-study; social history; Igbo culture; realistic fiction

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### **Introduction**

Life is the source of material for the creative writer though the specific life incidents that are at the base of the literary creation can hardly be independently located within the finished literary piece. Determining the source of a literary work, therefore, becomes an exciting and precarious task in literary criticism, unless the critic can prove the source beyond reasonable doubt. This is hard to achieve with great works of fiction. However, when a literary text is clearly teased out from traditional stories, as opposed to other sources such as myth and religious stories, it is possible to identify the source story. This is the case with the Ikemefuna narrative in Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* whose source it is the objective of this essay to discover. The essay is therefore, one of the few source studies that have emerged on Achebe's novels. Similar critical study was written on Achebe's *Arrow of God* by Charles Nnolim and was first published in *Research in African Literatures* in 1977.

Charles Nnolim explains what a source-study entails when he wrote that the aim of a source-study,

Is to establish the nature of the ingredients that coalesced into a finished literary artefact. Every literary critic knows that the possible sources of a finished literary work are as diverse as the writer's whole experience, for the writer may

have sketched his characters from people he has known in real life who serve him as prototypes; or he might have drawn the main events of his story from contemporary or past historical events or from a visual impression or a dream or a story he has heard. But a genuine source-study must demonstrate evidence that goes beyond mere echoes, by showing the *concrete testimony* of a printed page laid side by side with the original text. (Nnolim, “A Source for Arrow of God” 1)

With that he promised to ‘demonstrate’ in a study he titled “A Source for Arrow of God” that,

the single most important source—in fact, the only source—for *Arrow of God* is a tiny, socio-historical pamphlet published without copyright, by a retired corporal of the Nigerian Police Force. His name was (he died in 1972) Simon Alagbogu Nnolim, and the title of his pamphlet was *The History of Umuchu*, published by Eastern Press Syndicate, Depot Road, Enugu, Nigeria in 1953. (2)

It is exciting to discover the source of a literary work. A creative writer creates from life events and experiences and his interpretation of those life stories, written or oral. Achebe strongly believed that a literary work must be indebted to life when he states “I think there is a myth about creativity being something apart from life, but this is only a half-truth” (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 12). Discovering the source of a creative work could be exciting because of the possibilities of fresh meaning that this brings to the work and also how this demonstrates a creative writer’s ingenuity in creating a work of imagination from actual life events; it also proves the saying that a writer does not write in a vacuum. However, a source-study can also be controversial especially if the source is a published text and the writer is accused of failing to acknowledge it. Such accusation amounts to passing judgment on the moral integrity of the creative writer.

Parallel to Nnolim’s study of *Arrow of God*, this essay is motivated by a similar discovery of the possible source of the Ikemefuna narrative in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, which so far has supposedly remained a fictional creation, a work of imagination. The popularity of this novel is hinged on its realistic depiction of experiences, places, and characters that are not only believable and tangible but also recognizable. How does a creative writer arrive at a believable story knowing that as Kathleen Go, the copy editor of Penguin Random House explains, “fiction readers

look to you for that balance of fact and imagination” (cited in Stamper-Halpin 2016). Achebe is an advocate of literature of commitment that offers a more realistic approach to literary writing that addresses real issues in the society, literature that goes beyond the aesthetic function to serve some utilitarian function as well, a literary style that parts ways with art for art's sake. Underlining the factual content of Achebe's novels, Mpalive-Hangson Msiska writes in the introduction to the 2008 edition of *Things Fall Apart* that:

Conceived as a response to the denigration of Africa in colonial novels such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), *Things Fall Apart* stretches the novel form to create a space for the authentic African subject and his or her world. (i)

Achebe, therefore, is clearly responding to issues in the contemporary world and presenting same in the form of a novel. The desire to recreate real life issues and happenings probably informed Achebe's writing process; he was known to visit cultural activities and festivals with notepads. This approach was popularized by the French art critic *Émile Zola* (1840- 1902) whose *Experimental Novel* (1880) and *The Naturalist Novelists* (1881) advocated historical accuracy in the modern novel, a style that he demonstrated in his novel, *Térese Raquin* (1867). He is, consequently, known as the father of naturalism. Achebe, just as Zola before him, took copious notes of and documented what was happening in his environment and used them as building blocks for his novels. This approach afforded him the ability to recreate natural environments and lifelike stories and characters for his novels. Hence his novels make compelling reading on account of the believable characters, setting and stories. And reviewing Simon Gikandi's book titled *Reading Chinua Achebe*, Julie McGonegal understands the author as saying that “It is only by situating Achebe's novels in the colonial and postcolonial realities that produced them, that we can even begin to understand how they represent those realities in narrative.” His (Gikandi's) study shows how Achebe's novels not only describe Igbo and Nigerian societies but also reinvent them” (McGonegal 229). Studies similar in various degrees to the present one have been done by Ijeoma C. Nwajiaku, on Akachi Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), and Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006); in which she explored “how these authors imaginatively reconstructed historical truths about situations of armed struggle” (Nwajiaku 93). Another such study was carried out by Henri Oripeloye (2013) on Remi Raji's poem *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song*.

As one of Nigeria's foremost creative writers who were motivated by the negative image of Africa and its people in European creative and critical writings as well as their media, the objective of the committed African writers, such as Achebe, was to tell authentic African stories and counter European perspectives that had dehumanized African peoples over the years. Their duty, therefore, was to give voice to the colonized people, boost their fading morale and sense of self-worth, and educate the world on the real issues about Africa.

Telling the African story the African way became the hallmark of African writing of the postcolonial praxis. Here we should remember movements such as Negritude led by Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Sédar Senghor; Black Renaissance led by Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey; writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Denis Brutus, Achebe, etc; political activists such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, and all the sons and daughters of Africa who fought for the independence of African people and the legitimization of African culture. Achebe's stated intentions were to rebrand or rather to reclaim the image of Africa in his various essays, especially in his, perhaps the most controversial critique of Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella, *The Heart of Darkness*, a highly acclaimed work but which Achebe regarded as nothing but a racist manifesto. His purpose in writing his novels, therefore, was to present an accurate image of Africa which cannot be done without recourse to the realities in the African environment.

That being the case, it is not surprising to learn that the Ikemefuna incident in *Things Fall Apart* is, in actuality, a creative recall of an actual incident that occurred remarkably close to Achebe's hometown at the period he said it did. That will make the Ikemefuna incident a realistic fiction—a story that could have occurred. A review of the Ikemefuna narrative, followed by a similar incident will reveal a great resemblance that will point to a possible link between the two stories. Analogy between the two stories will be drawn through a study of certain elements, including the time and setting of the stories, the key characters involved in the incidents, the reason for the killing as well as the process of appeasement. It will be discovered that while some details are missing from the novel, they are revealed in the true story.

### **The Ikemefuna Narrative in *Things Fall Apart***

The story of Ikemefuna is very central to the novel because it represents the tension between cultural interruptions and traditional practices as seen through the eyes of the indigenes and the colonial administrators. It also summarizes the totality of the personality of the protagonist, Okonkwo his personality as strong, ambitious, influential, rash, stern and violent, unforgiving, a terror to his family.

Perhaps the colonial rule engendered some sense of cultural indifference that was unthinkable before the advent of the foreigner. If a person killed another, he must pay by producing somebody to the family of the deceased to replace the one killed. The family of the offender was fully aware of how taking a life was regarded by the community and how intense the anger of the deity usually would be. Human sacrifice was a way of appeasing the gods and cleansing the land after an abomination involving wilful loss of life has been committed. It was believed that if this ritual was not performed, more lives would be lost. Stories abound about certain deities that went on the rampage, killing people until the appropriate sacrifice was carried out to atone for an abominable act that was committed in the community. However, the colonial administrators deemed this practice a murder punishable under the colonial penal code.

A number of things (about the Ikemefuna incident or the ritual of human sacrifice?) are not explained in *Things Fall Apart*; for example, instead of allowing the Mbaino man who killed the Umuofia woman to pay with his own life, a boy was used to pay for the man's crime. We will find out why from the historical incident. Again, the reason the Mbaino man killed the Umuofia woman is not mentioned in the novel, but the historical incident provides the reason. A reader cannot understand why a man could kill a woman. It is quite incongruous. However, the actual event reveals that the victim is only symbolically a woman as will be explained shortly, but before that, here is a short summary of the Ikemefuna incident in *Things Fall Apart*.

One night, in Umuofia, the town crier announced an early morning meeting of the men of the community. When the men of Umuofia gathered at the meeting, Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in the village (described as a repository of knowledge for the Umuofia clan, and a conduit for information about other clans in the area) announced that the wife of Ogbuefi Udo was murdered by an Mbaino man when she went to the Mbaino market<sup>1</sup>. Decision was taken to send emissaries to Mbaino to choose one out of two options—peace or war.<sup>2</sup> Each of these alternatives carried serious consequences, as serious as or even more serious than the crime committed. Choosing peace would entail that Mbaino would be willing to atone for the crime on the terms of Umuofia (*ugwo isi*, a head for a head). If, on the other hand, they chose war, Umuofia was ready and willing to oblige them. No surprise Mbaino chose peace, in spite of what that choice would cost them—a human head, but what is one head compared to the population they were sure to

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1 Umuofia and Mbaino are close neighbors. This is important for the argument of this paper.

2 The identity of the killer and his motive are not hinted in the novel, but the real story has this information.

lose if war broke out between them and Umuofia. War was not an option for them because neither Mbaino nor any of the other communities around was a match for Umuofia. Umuofia was not only the greatest in battle but also had the strongest medicine men. Under the circumstance, the choice of peace was the wisest decision. Thus, Mbaino chose peace and had to atone for the killing by giving Umuofia two people - a boy and a girl. The girl was the actual payment for the woman killed and, therefore, belonged to the man whose wife was murdered. The boy, Ikemefuna, on the other hand, was to be sacrificed to cleanse the land of the abomination. He, therefore, was given to Umuofia to do whatever the clan decided through the oracle. As Umuofia waited for this oracular pronouncement, Ikemefuna had to stay in Okonkwo's house among his own children. That proclamation came three years later stating that Ikemefuna should be sacrificed. He was thus killed, unfortunately, by Okonkwo himself in a very pathetic circumstance thereby incurring the wrath of the earth goddess, the goddess of fertility and childbirth. That would not be the first crime that Okonkwo had committed against the law of the land, especially against the deity, *Ani* (earth goddess). Another case in point was his disruption of the peace week, in chapter four, when he beat his youngest wife, Ojiugo for coming back late to prepare dinner. By that act Okonkwo committed *nso-Ani* (sacrilege against the earth goddess, *Ani*) for which he was indicted and fined by the priestess of the deity. It is important for the current argument, to point out that Okonkwo's offences against the law of the land were never intentional; hence he paid his fines without hesitation. As a person, he just found it difficult to control his anger and impulse. As a matter of fact, Okonkwo was a strong protector of his people's culture and a hero of his community. He would do anything to serve, including killing for the land even if the victim was his adopted son.

The detail of how Ikemefuna is killed is important to this study because there are some similarities between that and how Ezealusi<sup>1</sup> in the oral tale, was killed. The day Ikemefuna was to die, the group of elders had him walk ahead of the line, while they followed behind him. This was usually the normal formation. In those days, the young and vulnerable was usually made to walk ahead while the older and more powerful brought the rear. There was a reason for this. The roads were winding narrow bush pathways through the jungle prone to predators in the form of not just wild animals such as lions, hyenas, and anacondas, but also kidnappers. When the pot of palm wine which Ikemefuna was carrying on his head was broken by the elder

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1 This is a real story and an unfortunate one, hence I have no intention of revealing the real names of the persons involved, but I will keep the names of the real communities affected in the matter.

nearest to him, the boy instinctively ran through the line of men towards his father, Okonkwo for protection. Remembering Ogbuefi Ezeudu's advise that he should not lend a hand in killing the boy who calls him father, Okonkwo had purposely receded to the rear to avoid killing the boy himself. However, when the boy ran to him for protection Okonkwo's killer instinct took over and instead of protecting the boy he, instinctively, cut him down. It is important to state that Okonkwo's action is in accordance with the oracular demand that the boy be sacrificed. He is therefore serving the gods of the land. But having developed his killer-instinct above all other instincts, in an effort to avoid ever acting weak, that killer-instinct has taken a life of its own and works like a runaway train. He continues killing until he kills himself at the end of the novel.

This story is believed to be a work of fiction meaning, according to the *Illustrated Oxford Dictionary* 1998, "an invented idea or statement or narrative" and "literature especially novels, describing imaginary events and people." A more elaborated definition is found in *Study.com*: "A work of fiction is created in the imagination of its author. The author invents the story and makes up the characters, the plot or the storyline, the dialogue and sometimes even the setting." As already highlighted by Nnolim, "the possible sources of a finished literary work are as diverse as the writer's whole experience"; therefore, Achebe could have invented the story of Ikemefuna, and perhaps he did. However, there are sometimes coincidences where a work of fiction may resemble real incidents. Even though fiction is believed to be work of imagination, it is hard to imagine something that does not exist somewhere, sometime, somehow, or in some form hence the popular statement by the celebrated American poet and critic, Ezra Loomis Pound that "Literature does not exist in a vacuum. Writers as such have a definite social function exactly proportional to their ability as writers. This is their main use. All other uses are relative, and temporary, and can be estimated only in relation to the views of a particular estimator" (Pound 32). Robert A. Hall Jr adds that literature "grows out of and is part of human culture and can only be understood against the background of its cultural matrix." In response to 'isolationists' critics who are opposed to the sociological approach to the interpretation of literature, Hall declares that,

removal of literary scholarship from any concern with real life, is one of the major reasons why our present-day students, and indeed our community as a whole, have become alienated from literature, ceasing to regard it as a study from which they can derive direct personal benefit or learn anything helpful to them in their contact with life. (Hall 9-10)



By now the point has sufficiently been made that a literary writer draws ideas and inspiration from incidents in his environment, immediate or remote. The original source materials can be written sources such as documents, diaries, books; media sources such as television, radio, recordings; oral sources such as oral history, folklore; and others. Most often, multiple sources are involved in a creative work. In any case, the original source of information is hardly recognisable in the finished work. But a story has a source. Achebe himself acknowledges his indebtedness to experiences from his environment to create the world of his novels when he states in an interview: “A writer invents and even the invention is a function of his experience and so, what I’m saying is that we do not imagine things that are well beyond the experience of our society” (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 119). A study involving the discovery of the source of information for a literary work is no doubt fascinating, but such work can hardly be conclusive. There should, however, be enough analogy to suggest a link between the literary work and its original source. This is what the present study intends to do, to correlate the Ikemefuna narrative with an incident in the real world.

This research serendipitously stumbled upon a story, which is similar to Ikemefuna narrative in Chinua Achebe’s classic novel, *Things Fall Apart*, while conducting a research into certain cultural objects and their meaning in Igboland. When the conversation shifted to kolanut, the interviewee, Chief Mbamaonyeukwu Chiezie, was asked to recall incidents involving kolanut to illustrate how serious the rules of kolanut are among Igbo people of Nigeria. One of the stories he told resonated with the incident in the Ikemefuna narrative, begging the question: Is this the source of that story in *Things Fall Apart*? Is it then possible that the Ikemefuna story is not an imaginary tale but rather an adaptation of a real and specific incident? Is the Ikemefuna story in *Things Fall Apart* a fictionalization of a true event?

Some terminologies have emerged in literary criticism to describe some works of fiction that are linkable to specific real and contemporary incidents. These terms include fictional realism (Schneider and Solodkoff 2009), realistic fiction, faction, denoting literary works with factual contents. The source contents are obvious to those who know them. As has been noted, *Things Fall Apart*, does not advance any reason for the killing of the Umuofia woman by an Mbaino man. But there is no action without a motivation. Again, the relationship of the woman that is killed and the man who kills her is not stated. However, in the oral account which the novel alludes to, all these missing links are supplied.

### **A Head for the Kola Nut: In Defence of Custom?**

In an interview with an eighty-nine year old traditionalist, Chief Mbamaonyekwu Chiezie, a specific question was asked about conflicts involving kolanuts. The second incident which the man narrated resonated with the Ikemefuna incident in *Things Fall Apart* and it is recalled below.

Kola nut is a symbol of peace and respect among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria (Ihediwa, Nwashindu, and Onah 2014). Therefore, it is served and eaten before any meeting to assure that such a meeting is indeed a meeting of friends and people of good will. Thus, if any member of the gathering refuses to partake of the kola nut, it is a sign that he is not for peace. Kolanut is also an object of prayer in the traditional way. They pray for the good of all present and guidance throughout the meeting to achieve good results. This is men's culture, and it has its rules. To begin with, a woman does not break kola nuts in the company of men. Again, it is the exclusive right of the oldest person to break it. Both age and gender rules are observed in this ritual. But there is a third element in the rules governing the breaking and serving of kola nuts. The exception to the rule of seniority states that a man, irrespective of how young, must break the first kola nut in his house even if his guest is older than him. It was this aspect of the rule of the kola nut that was broken with dire consequence in the story that is about to unfold.

It all began the day an Umudioka man, who will be named Chief Eji<sup>1</sup> and an Umunya man, who will be known in this study as Ezealusi<sup>2</sup> went to Ogbunike for an early morning discussion with the traditional ruler of the town. Ezealusi was actually the chief priest of a deity in Umunya, known as *Enem*, whose shrine is located in Okpu village and Chief Eji was a prominent chief and a man of wealth and power who was always accompanied by his slaves acting as his bodyguards carrying long sharp machetes (Obejili) and a gun. The host, the traditional ruler of Ogbunike, was the youngest of the three, and ordinarily would not break the kola nut, but culture allowed him to do that since it was the first kola nut presented in his house that morning. Normally, a host presents the kola nut to his guests who touch and acknowledge the gift of love and friendship and pass it back to him to pray over it, after which the host then breaks the kola nut into as many pieces as there are people at that meeting and shares it. The host picks a piece to eat before passing the rest on to his guests to pick and eat. This ritual will end before the agenda of the

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1 I am using only part of his name to protect the identity of the man's descendants.

2 Ezealusi (eze alusi) means chief priest of a deity, and that was the function of the Umunya man who was killed in the real incident.

meeting will be stated. In the incident we are about to narrate, the kola nut was first passed to Chief Eji who received it and passed it on to Ezealusi. Ezealusi should have received it and passed it back to the host to break, saying “oji eze di eze n’aka” meaning literally that “the king’s kola nut is in the king’s hand” so he should go ahead and break it.

However, on this occasion, rather than return the kola nut to the host, Ezealusi picked and broke it. He was the least qualified to break that kola nut because he was neither the oldest of the three, Chief Eji was, nor was he the host. Being a chief priest was irrelevant in that circumstance unless the meeting was taking place in his shrine. Nevertheless, the host seemed to overlook the blunder and proceeded with the meeting. Chief Eji did not eat his own rather he put it behind his ear lobe. At the end of the meeting the two guests left together the way they came through the narrow bush pathway where people must walk in a single file. Ezealusi was in the lead, followed by Chief Eji, while the man’s armed bodyguards brought up the rear. At the outskirts of town, Chief Eji suddenly pulled back, grabbed a long sharp machete from one of his bodyguards and slashed his friend’s throat. He brought out the piece of kola nut which he had stuck behind his ear lobe and forced it into the dying man’s mouth saying, “Eat kola nut to your death. Who told you that you could insult me and get away with it? Nobody can and least of all you, *anuofia* (wild animal)!” He left him there and went home. On getting to his house, he found a lot of movement in his compound and was immediately informed that one of his pregnant wives had just been delivered of a baby girl. The name he chose for the baby girl, Onyedinkpu was meant to document the incident that just took place. The name which in full is *Onye di n’Okpu ga ekwulu Okpu?* which translated into the English language means “Who in Okpu is brave enough to speak for Okpu?” Chief Eji knew that nobody would dare to challenge him, and nobody did. Not long after the incident, however, people started dying, mysteriously, in Umunya and consultation with the oracle revealed that the deity, Enem, whose chief priest was murdered was angry that nobody was serving him food anymore and Umunya kept quiet. The mysterious deaths soon spilled over to Umudioka forcing them to reach out to Umunya to resolve the problem. With the cause of the mystery deaths revealed, reparation and appeasement process commenced.

After due consultation, it was decided that Umunya should build a zinc house in Umudioka and demolish same. It is important to explain this process. By custom, it is the right of Umunya to destroy things in Umudioka to protest the killing of their kinsman. When the aggrieved party begins to destroy things, it is expected that the offending party will assuage their anger by presenting them with the agreed

reparation. On their own part, Umudioka would give two people to Umunya, a boy and a girl. The girl would be a bride to the slain chief priest while the boy would be used as an object of sacrifice to appease the angry deity and cleanse the community of the abomination committed by their kinsman. Both communities agreed on this plan. That was how such grievous matters were usually settled in the land before the coming of the colonial government. It is reminiscent of a culture that has zero tolerance for criminal and violent acts. That indigenous criminal code has the credit of creating a community with low propensity for violent crimes. However, in this story, Umudioka did not present the human reparation, rather money was presented to Umunya in place of the boy. This is because ritual killing had been banned by the colonial administration and defaulters were made to face very tough legal consequences such as imprisonment. Using money to pay for crime of murder is a cheap moral code that literally lifts the ban on such crimes, creating the enabling atmosphere for further crimes to occur in a hitherto crime free society. This is the story as narrated by Chief Ugonwanne Mbamaonyeukwu Chiezie, (alias Eze Afojulu), 89 years old Umudioka man. This interview was audio recorded and transcribed into English. He passed away on 30<sup>th</sup> July, 2015 at the age of 95. He was not able to supply dates even though Chief Eji was his uncle. It was after he had told this story that he was informed about the similar tale written by a man from Ogidi (Chinua Achebe). His response was just a shrug of the shoulders. The similarities between this story and the Ikemefuna story in *Things Fall Apart* will be glaring to literary scholars and students who have studied the novel, leaving no doubt in their minds that it is the source of the Ikemefuna narrative.

### **Similarities and Differences in the Two Stories**

The story above resembles the Ikemefuna story in many ways, which makes it a possible basis for the Ikemefuna narrative in *Things Fall Apart* despite the obvious adaptation and transposition of the original incident into an imaginary story at the basis of the novel.

### **The Historical Period**

It is apparent that the original incident occurred in the early part of the colonial administration that was why contrary to the traditional requirements for reparation changes had to be made in accordance with the new laws instituted by the colonial administration. On the other hand, despite the heavy physical and psychological presence of the colonial authority throughout *Things Fall Apart*, it is important to notice that there was no colonial intervention in the killings of the Umuofia woman and Ikemefuna. However, in the original story, Umudioka negotiated with a man a

from another community to stand trial for Chief Eji in exchange for three pounds (£3). The man was jailed for three months because Ezealusi was not quite dead. But he died two days after the prisoner was released<sup>1</sup>.

### **The Place of the Action**

The towns involved in the novel are neighbouring towns of Umuofia and Mbaino. The meaning of Mbaino (four towns) is important for this analysis because though only two neighbouring communities are mentioned in the novel, in the real story four communities were involved, directly and indirectly. The novelist did not invent the name Umuofia. As Ekpunobi's historical study of Umuoji reveals, Umuofia was one of the traditional institutions in Umuoji along with others including Umuokpu, Umuada, Nze-na Ozo, and the Age Grade (Ekpunobi, 1998). Umuoji is another town in Idemili Local Government Area close to where the incident occurred.

The oral tale involved two friends, one (the aggressor) from Umudioka and the other (the victim) from Umunya, two towns that share a common boundary, just as Umuofia and Mbaino. But the seed of the conflict that culminated in the killing was sown during an early morning meeting in Ogbunike, a town that shares a common boundary with Umudioka and Umunya. The fourth town, Ogidi, was not involved in the killing, even remotely, but it happened to be the hometown of the man who created a fictional story out of the incident, Chinua Achebe. Ogidi has a common boundary with Ogbunike located in the north, and Umudioka in the east while Umunya has a common boundary with Umudioka and Ogbunike. All four communities, therefore, are located in close proximity and are within a walking distance from one another such that it is difficult for a stranger driving around the area to tell when he has crossed one community into another. Even the signboards can be confusing because they do not indicate which buildings belong to which community.

The point, therefore, is that though Ogidi was not involved in the killing incident, there is no doubt that it must have been fully aware of the incident. It is also interesting to mention that Iguedo, which is Okonkwo's village in the novel, is

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1 There is a reason the narrator left out the colonial administration's involvement. It is probably due to the bizarre content involved in the process. Our informant explained that Umudioka assured the surrogate that the injured man would not die until he had done the three-month term. If the man died the surrogate would receive harsher sentence. When the authorities arrived from Onitsha, the surrogate claimed to be the culprit, and was taken away and eventually sent to jail after trial. Umudioka had strong medicine men in those days who were able to suspend the man's life on a tall tree. That way, the soul would not be able to leave the body. He laid in the hospital breathing unable to move on. When the surrogate was released from prison, the fetish was brought down, and the man's soul was released to move on.

in reality a clan made up of four communities of which Ogbunike is one. The above information points to the fact that Achebe lived in close proximity to that incident that occurred between Umudioka and Umunya. The Eji/Ezealusi incident occurred before Achebe was born in 1930, but the tale of such incidents lived much longer in the area they occurred. The comment made by the narrator in Chapter Two of the novel: "The lad's name was Ikemefuna, whose sad story is still told in Umuofia unto this day" (Achebe 10), suggests clearly how he got the information for his novel.

Again, these communities share a lot more in common. For instance, they intermarry, and all their major festivals take place on the same days. Nkpikpa Festival of Umudioka; Nwafor Festival of Ogidi, Isigwu Festival of Umunya, and Nwafor Festival of Ogbunike. These festivals are celebrated on Afor day, one of the four related deities associated with the Igbo traditional week, others being Nkwo, Eke, and Oye (Enyia & Kalu, 2018). Also, the four festivals usually take place in July every year, and last for three days, to mark the end of the farming season.<sup>1</sup>

### **Characters Involved**

Characters that share similar attributes in the two stories include, Ikemefuna, Okonkwo, the Umuofia woman that was murdered, and her husband, Ogbuefi Udo in the novel; Chief Eji and Ezealusi and his deity, Alusi Enem, in the real story.

As the protagonist in the novel, Okonkwo, is a powerful and influential member of his community. He is known to defend the purity and sanctity of his people's culture; he rejects the new religion and proposes a total extermination of its members, and he demonstrates his level of hatred for the foreign interference when he kills the messenger of the District Commissioner, the last straw that ends his killing spree and 'indiscrete' behaviours. Of all the six incidents involving killing in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo perpetrated four of them. Similarly, Chief Eji did not hesitate when it came to killing whoever went against the cultural norm and he did not wait for elders to take decision on such issues. He just went ahead to take laws into his hands. In the same manner as Okonkwo, he was rich and powerful and had many wives and children. However, unlike Okonkwo, he had slaves and bodyguards, marks of his affluence. Okonkwo is a prototype of Chief Eji. Both men are rich, powerful, and respected members of their respective communities, quick to anger, snobbish, rash, and culture-conscious.

In the novel, Ogbuefi Udo is the Umuofia man whose wife is killed by an Mbaino man. The name of the woman is not given, and the reason for the killing is

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<sup>1</sup> More about these four cultural festivals can be accessed from <https://www.ogbunike.ng/tag/culture/>, and <https://www.davidyoryor.com › 2017/08 › isigwu-umunya-2017>, as well as <https://www.nairaland.com/3947849/mkpukpa-festival-ndi-umudioka-dunukofia>

not provided. Readers are kept in the dark about the circumstances of the murder. In the real story Udo is one of the deities in Okpu, Ezealusi's village in Umunya. It is important to understand a bit about Udo. It was a popular deity across Igbo speaking towns in those days, especially around the area where *Things Fall Apart* is set. According to a study carried out by Emeasoba and Ogbuefi, the deity Udo was allocated lands. However, the authors' study also reveals that all the land previously owned by Udo in Ogbunike and some other towns no longer exist, having been converted to churches, schools, health centres, markets and farmlands (Emeasoba & Ogbuefi 66). The probable reason for the popularity of Udo in those days stems from its role in the society. According to Miracle Chinonso (2017) Udo is a god of diplomacy, "His sphere of influence extends to diplomatic meeting, agreement, court cases, diplomatic oaths..." It was the rule of this deity that Ezealusi violated.

The Umuofia woman that is killed has gone to Mbaino market. In reality, Umudioka has the largest native market in the area at the time and people from many towns as far away as Onitsha and Awka, in addition to her nearest neighbours—Ogidi, Ogbunike and Umunya, attended that market named Afor-Igwe Umudioka which operated every four days<sup>1</sup>. Ezealusi had come to the market town of Umudioka primarily for an early morning meeting with Chief Eji, and the Ogbunike ruler. Such meetings were best fixed on market days because people did not go to the farm on market days. Umudioka is therefore the Mbaino in *Things Fall Apart* because the market in question is located there, and the man who committed the murder was from there, and it is the only one among the four towns that has common boundary with all the other three. It follows, then that Umunya is the Umuofia of *Things Fall Apart*. That being the case, the statuses of the two key communities directly involved in the incident were swapped for obvious reason—to create fiction.

In the novel, the boy Ikemefuna is sacrificed to appease the gods of the land for the reckless killing of Udo's wife (Ezealusi), and to avoid a war between Mbaino and Umuofia communities. However, in the oral account an agreement was reached between the two communities to use money instead of a boy, it was agreed that Umudioka should repay Umunya with money to avoid trouble with the colonial administration that had banned human sacrifices.

The predominant practice is that a priest of a deity, be it male or female deity, is symbolically a wife to the deity, and as such he is expected to conduct himself

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1 There are four days in Igbo native week, and they are Nkwo, Oye, Eke, Afor. Since urbanisation the Afor-igwe market, just as many other markets in Igboland that used to sit once every native week, has now transformed into a daily market. But though it is now a daily market, it is obviously busiest on Afor days.

as a woman should and observe some of the taboos observed by women. This is also true of the priest of the Idemili Goddess as indicated by Ifi Amadiume, "In the performance of his duty, the priest of Idemili was expected to abide by certain rules. He must not wear a loincloth but must tie a wrapper like a woman" (101). If it did not make sense to readers why a man should kill a woman who does nothing but attend the market, it is probably because the person that is killed is not really a woman, but actually a man, a juju priest.

### **Conclusion: The Relevance of Socio-Cultural Values and Traditions**

This essay has attempted to study the source of the Ikemefuna narrative by tracing and identifying an actual historical incident that occurred around and within the area that provided the materials for Chinua Achebe's classic novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Aspects of the socio-cultural milieu and practices such as rituals and customary practice and norms of the Igbo society have been identified with a view to underscore the Ikemefuna narrative as a vital embodiment of the Igbo traditional values in pre-colonial times. To establish the historical incident as a source for the Ikemefuna story, the paper draws a parallel between the novel and the historical antecedence based on oral historical accounts, location and setting and characterisation. Accordingly, it was established that the incident of the killing of Ikemefuna which was fictionalized in *Things Fall Apart* occurred between Umunya and Umudioka, while the cause of the problem took place in Ogbunike, and all these towns are located within walking distances from Ogidi, Achebe's hometown. Other instances of similarities relate to the time and place of the actions; the key characters such as Ogbuefi Udo (Udo is the name of a deity in Umunya); Udo's wife (actually the juju priest); Ikemefuna (the reparation), Okonkwo (a prototype of Chief Eji who murdered his friend, a priest). The paper concludes that the differences between the historical incident and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* may have been necessitated by the exigencies of the creative imaginative processes and also the need to give each creative work, including those that draw their inspirations from history, their individual stamps of creative identity. Although essentially a work of creative imagination, we find that the Ikemefuna story resonates and compares perfectly with the Eji/Ezealusi story. Finally, *Things Falls Apart* not only chronicles but also constitutes a major commentary on the violation of the Igbo socio-cultural ethics, norms and values under British colonialism.

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