

African Literature, a Reflection of African Culture: An Assessment of the Works of New Generation Nigerian Novelists

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Abstract: African literature is a fête of African traditions. The focus of this investigation was to investigate how the contemporary African novelists have used their novels as a stand point to showcase the African culture to the world. Particularly, the works of Chimamanda Adichie and Akachi Adimora Ezigbo were examined. They demonstrated the synergetic relationship between language, culture and literature as each complements and projects the other. This exploration is anchored on the theory of Culturology. This theory emphasizes the supremacy of the culture of the people over other systems because while society is split into classes and parties, each fighting for power and supremacy, culture unites the people and transcends social, national and historical boundaries. The descriptive system of data analysis, the primary and secondary data collection methods were also employed. Interestingly, these novels revealed Igbo food, festivals, songs, dances, folk stories, proverbs and so on. Thus, these novels serve the purpose of ethnic significance as the authors have used the English Language to express, project and capture the African and specifically, Igbo creative impulse and cultural roots. This paper consequently, concluded that literature is a manifestation of the people's culture.

Keywords; Language, Literature, Culture, Igbo Cuisine and Traditional Igbo Religion

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I. INTRODUCTION

Babajide in Yeibo (2011) maintains that a writer's style is informed and shaped by the totality of his social and political background, religious disposition, cultural beliefs, experience, educational accomplishment, geographical setting and exposure. Particularly, the African literary artists are appealingly influenced by African culture.

Culture invariably, has been defined as the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. African culture therefore, defines her language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. As a result, Kehinde in Osunbade (2009) opines that Literature reflects the events of the past, conveys socio-cultural values and creates great knowledge of the custom of its enabling society. This inquiry therefore, investigates how Adichie and Adimora have used their novels, *The Last of the Strong Ones* and *Purple Hibiscus* to reflect the African culture in general and Igbo culture in particular.

Statement of the Problem

Many non African authors had superficial and negative pictures about Africa, Africans and African culture. But the old generation writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Flora Nwakpa, Ferdinand Oyono, Ayikwe Armah, Sembene Ousmene, Camera Laye among others used their literary works to expose the African culture to the world in order to prove to the world that African and indeed Africans did not hear of or learn about culture from the Europeans but that Africa had a culture of great depth, value, beauty and originality (Achebe, 1973). This inquiry therefore seeks to find out if the contemporary Nigerian novelists still use their novels to project their culture to the universe as their predecessors did.

Purpose of the Study

The study is aimed at showing how African writers have projected their pride in their African culture and roots.

African Literature

The following questions beg for answers in the discussion of African literature:

- What is African Literature?
- Is African Literature different from other world Literatures?

- Who is an African Writer?
- Is African writer anyone born of African parents?

Dube (2017) believes that it is difficult to define African literature because Africa is vast and has many languages. Hamilton (2009) is of the opinion that the fourth question would pose a lot of problems considering the strong African presence in Asia, Australia, Central America, Latin America and Europe. Hamilton also wants to know if Obama will be considered an African, since his Father was a Kenyan. He also wants to know if African literature is Literature written in Africa, and do we consider Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) as African Literature since they are set in Africa and they explore the people and culture of Africa with European Protagonists. Despite these perplexities, the following definitions have been given to African Literature.

Hamilton (2009) delineates African Literature as Literature written by an African about Africa, using common African characters, settings and themes that are conveyed through African proverbs. For Awa (2018:15) African Literature depicts all the literary works that articulate the socio-cultural and historical imperatives of the African people, which is written by any African who is a citizen of any African country. It is a reflection of African culture, African society, African Cuisine, African historical, political, social and religious experiences.

Going by the above recountals, African literature could be seen as any literary piece written by an African about Africa, about Africans, about their perplexities and about their spectacular achievements whether it is written in any African language or in any European tongue. But Achebe advises that if it is written in an imperial language, the tongue should be given an African flavour so as to capture the African cultural heritage and experience more expediently (Bame 2017).

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Since this study is purely text- based, the ex-post facto research design, the primary and secondary data collection methods, the content or descriptive or textual system of data analysis, and the simple random sampling technique were employed in this work. This inquiry is anchored on the theory of culturology or science of culture. Culturology is traced to late 19th century and early 20th century in Russia. Science of culture is associated with Mikhail Bakhtin, Aleskel Losev, Sergy Averintsev, Georgy Gachev, Yuri Lotman, Vladimir Toporov and others. The word culturology was borrowed from American Anthropologist, Lexlie White who defined Culturology as the field of Science which studies culture as cultural systems. He views it as the sociological, economic, political and historical study of concrete cultural systems. Culturology is therefore an integral study of human cultures as integral systems and their influence on human behaviour. It is concerned with the scientific understanding, description, analysis and prediction of cultures as a whole. It investigates the diversity of cultures, their mode of interaction and functions as a metadiscipline within the humanities so as to link the variety of cultural phenomena studied separately by philosophy, history, literary and art criticism. Berdiav in Epstein (1999) believes that the spiritual supremacy belongs to culture and the goals of society are fulfilled in culture and not in politics.

Accordingly, culture is central. So, while society is split into classes and parties, each fighting for power and supremacy, culture unites the people and transcends social, national, political and historical boundaries. Thus, culturology aims at examining culture as the locus of all existing and possible practices that taken as a whole liberates humans from their natural conditions and physical dependencies, including the dependency of the weak on the strong. Bakhtin in Epstein (1999) therefore insists that literature is an inseparable part of culture and it cannot be understood outside the total contest of the entire culture of a given people and epoch, thus, the *raison d'être* for anchoring this piece on culturology. The current study therefore intends to gain a full insight into how Adichie and Adimora have used their novels, *The Last of the Strong Ones* and *Purple Hibiscus* to perform the all important function of projecting the African culture to the world.

II. MANIFESTATIONS OF IGBO CULTURE IN ADIMORA'S THE LAST OF THE STRONG ONES AND ADICHIE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS

African literature is a fusion of various cultural projections. This is because Africa is made up of numerous cultures, ethnic groups, languages and world views. This has given impetus to most African new generation writers to lace up their narratives with African local words, phrases and expressions, festivals, oral songs, proverbs, oral narrative style and more interestingly African mouth-watery, fascinating and alluring cuisines in order to give African flavor to African literary works.

Igbo Lexical Items

In the first place, Igbo expressions work uniquely into the complex embroidery of their narratives. Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo for instance, spices up her narratives especially *The Last of the Strong Ones* with ample local Igbo words, phrases and sentences which are mirror images of Igbo culture just as other writers of

Igbo extraction who imbibe “Igbonization” of English Language for aesthetics and meaning as seen in the following examples:

Igbo expressions	English Interpretation
Osiso osiso	Fast (P4, <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i>)
I kpotago ya	Have you brought him/her (P4, <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i>)
Kedu afa gi?	What is your name? (P5, <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i>)
I nugo?	Have you heard? (P6, <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i>)
Nee anya	Look here (P6, <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i>)
Nwunye m	My Wife (P72, <i>Purple Hibiscus</i>)
Chukwu	God (P83, <i>Purple Hibiscus</i>)
Tufia	God forbid (P45, <i>Purple Hibiscus</i>)
Onye ori	A Thief (P377, <i>Children of the Eagle</i>)
Ikuku	Wind (P411, <i>Children of the Eagle</i>)
Ozu	Corpse (P209, <i>Purple Hibiscus</i>)
Ke Kwanu?	How are you (P208, <i>Purple Hibiscus</i>)
Oke Ohia	Thick Forest (P36, <i>The Last of the Strong Ones</i>)
Chi	God (P59, <i>The Last of the Strong Ones</i>)
Biko	Please (P16, <i>Purple Hibiscus</i>)
Nno nu	You are welcome (P63, <i>Purple Hibiscus</i>)
Ima Mmuo	Initiation into the spirit (P95, <i>Purple Hibiscus</i>)
Mmuo	Spirit (P95, <i>Purple Hibiscus</i>)

ITEMS OF ADORNMENT

Jigida

The jigida (waist beads) are traditional collection of beads worn by young maidens in Africa at special occasions. The beads are common to Yoruba, Igbo, Calabar and other regions of Africa. The waist beads have different names according to the region like the Jel-jelli waist beads of Senegal, and the Djalay dijalay of Chad. The four regions of Nigeria have their own type of Jigida such as the Giri-giri, the Ileke-idi of the Yoruba, the Yomba waist beads, and Jigida of cross river/Calabar. The Jigida waist beads are worn on special occasions as a symbol of purity, beauty, and elegance. The beads also underline freedom, fashion and the true meaning of womanhood. They are worn at special occasions, such as coronations, traditional marriage ceremonies, coming of age, traditional dances, Cultural displays and so on. The Jigida is worn as a fashion statement by the young Igbo maidens to be specific. Iroegbu (2012).

Uri (Uli) and Uhie

Ezeajugh (2009) opines that body adornment is an important cultural activity, which is widely practiced by many ethnic groups in Nigeria and indeed Africa. Some of these body decorations are temporal, while others are permanent. Uli and uhie are among the temporary body designs. These designs hold great significance for traditional society because they possess aesthetic appeal. Uli stands out as the most popular design practiced by the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria. It is the art of decorating the body in the pattern of designs with liquid juices extracted from the Uli pods which belong to the *Randi cordetta* tree. The plant which yields the pods or fruits from which the dye is extracted is known as Uli and when the dye is applied to the skin, the patterns created as designs on the body are also known as Uli. There are various species of Uli plant, which are Uli Oba, Uli Mkpo, Uli Obodobo and others. To ensure good registration on the body, Ufie (Cam wood dust or paste) may be used to prime the skin before the application of uli. Uli and Ufie are not used for decorative purpose only. Women rub Ufie on their bodies for medicinal reasons. It refreshes and rejuvenates the body as put forward by Onyekaozuru in the *The Last of the Strong Ones*

“I took care of my body to make it look beautiful again. It gave me pleasure to wear my ‘jigida’ and have my skin adorned with ‘uhie’ and ‘uli’. A pleasant sensation which spread all over me as I would lie or sit up on a mat, as one of my friends would tenderly touch up my body with uli. I would turn this way or that at the request of the beautician. (P 59)

IGBO CUISINE

Adichie also uses words, which do not have their direct lexical equivalents in Standard English such as “egusi soup”, “orah soup”, “onugbu soup” “onugbu leaves” , “ngwo-ngwo”, “ofe nsala”, “isi-ewu”, “utazi”, “fufu”, “okpa di oku” etc. These are African (Igbo) popular traditional food. The description of this food in the novels makes the reader to salivate as he or she reads through the pages of the novels. They appear conspicuously in the chapter: “BREAKING OF GODS Palm Sunday”

Egusi Soup (Ofe Egusi)

This is a soup prepared with melon (gourds) seeds. It is known as Miyan Gushi in Hausa, Ofe Egusi in Igbo and Efo Egusi in Yoruba. There are different methods of cooking Egusi soup

- i. Fried Egusi Soup- (The Egusi is fried in palm oil before other ingredients are added)
- ii. Akpuruakpu Egusi- where the ground egusi is moulded into balls and cooked in the soup such that you will be eating the egusi balls like meat while enjoying the meal.

The ingredients for egusi soup are egusi, melon seeds, palm oil, beef, dry fish, stockfish, crayfish, Nigerian pumpkin leaves or spinach or bitter leaves, pepper, salt, stock cubes and ogiri okpei (traditional locust bean seasoning)

Ofe onugbu (Bitter leaf Soup)

This is one of the traditional soups in Nigeria. It is common among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria. The ingredients used for bitter leaf soup include washed and squeezed bitter leaf, a handful of the soft variety of cocoyam, which is used mainly as a thickener in some recipes such as bitter leaf soup and ora soup, red palm oil, assorted beef, assorted fish, pepper, salt, ground crayfish, stock cubes, ogiri Igbo (traditional seasoning).

Fufu

This is an African staple food made by mashing or pounding any of the following; corn, millet, rice, cassava, plantain, green banana, or yam. Fufu looks like a creamy paste and does not have a distinct taste, hence it relies on soup/sauce dishes for taste. Consequently, in *Purple Hibiscus*, Fufu was served with *Onugbu soup*

Lunch was fufu and onugbu soup. The fufu was smooth and fluffy, Sisi made it well; she pounded the yam energetically, adding drops of water into the mortar, her cheeks contracting with the thump-thump-thump of the pestle. The soup was thick with chunks of boiled beef and dried fish and dark onugbu leaves...I moulded the fufu into small balls with my fingers, dipped it in the soup, making sure to scoop up fish, chunk and then brought it up to my mouth (p.19)

Ofe Nsala (nsala soup)

This is a delicious thin white Igbo soup. It is called white soup because of its light color, as a result of the absence of palm oil. The authentic Nsala Soup recipe is prepared with fresh whole catfish, which gives the soup its unique taste. In the absence of whole catfish, catfish fillets or conger eel can be used. The ingredients for Nsala soup are catfish, raw yam cubes or yam powder, chopped utazi leaves, ground crayfish, ogiri (fermented locust beans), chili pepper, stock cubes, and salt to taste. For a richer and yummier nsala soup, one can also add dried fish, stockfish, chicken pieces or beef pieces. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Mama made Ofe Nsala for Kambili "Mama brought some *Ofe Nsala* a little later, but the aromatic soup only made me..."p.23

Ofe Ora (Ora Soup)

Ora or Oha soup is also native to the South Eastern Nigeria. It is a very traditional soup similar to the bitter leaf soup but it is prepared with ora leaves. Ora soup is special because the tender ora leaves used in preparing this soup are seasonal unlike the bitter leaf which can be found all year round. The ingredients for ora soup include ora leaves, soft cocoyam, red palm oil, assorted meat, assorted fish, chili pepper, ground crayfish, stock cubes, ogiri Igbo and salt to taste.

Okpa

Okpa is a traditional Nigerian food, which is very popular in the Eastern part of Nigeria. It tastes good. It is made with Bambara bean flour. The flour is made from ground Bambara nuts/beans. It is also called the Lions food or the King's meal by the Igbos in Eastern Nigeria. It is tasty and delicious; the ingredients used in the preparation of Okpa are Okpa flour, palm oil, ground crayfish (optional), stock cubes, pepper, salt and warm water. In *Purple Hibiscus*,

At Ninth Mile, Papa stopped to buy Bread and Okpa. Hawkers descended on our car pushing boiled eggs, roasted cashew nuts, bottled water, bread, okpa, agidi into every window of the car, chanting: buy from me, oh!, I will sell well to you(p. 62)

MMANWU (MASQUERADE)

Mmanwu is the traditional masquerade popular with the Igbo in Southern Nigeria. They are held according to the community local Calendar at festivals, burial rites and so on. Masquerades are believed to represent spiritual elements. The Igbo believe that they represent deities or dead relatives. The identity of the masquerade is usually undisclosed and it is restricted to men. In Igbo culture, masquerades are used for maintaining peace and order, as they are primarily used as law enforcement agents.

IGBO TRADITIONAL RELIGION

This is based on the belief that there is one creator, God who is also called Chineke, Chukwu or Chi. The creator can be approached through numerous other deities and spirits. There is also the belief that ancestors protect their living descendants and are responsible for rain, harvest, health and children. Shrines are made in honour of the earth spirits and wooden figures are kept in the shrines and they represent ancestors and patrons. Igbo traditional religion is splendidly displayed by Chimamanda Adichie in her *Purple Hibiscus* as rendered expressly by Papa-Nnukwu. Chineke, I thank you for this new morning! I thank you for the sun that rises” Chineke I have killed no one, have taken no one’s land, I have not committed adultery. Chineke! I have wished others well. I have helped those who have nothing with the little that my hands can spare. Chineke! Bless me. Let me find enough to fill my stomach. Bless my daughter, Ifeoma. Give her enough for her family. Chineke! Bless my son, Eugene. Let the sun not set on his prosperity. Lift the curse they have put on him. Chineke! Bless the children of my children. Let your eyes follow them from evil and towards good. Chineke! Those who wish others well, keep them well. Those who wish others ill, keep them ill. (P.174-175)

Papa-Nnukwu is a traditionalist. He follows the rituals of his ancestors and believes in a pantheistic model of religion. He is a symbol of pure Igbo traditional religion.

IGBO ORAL TRADITIONAL

Folk Stories

The greatest endowment of African literature is the embellishment of African literature with African oral traditions. Anyanwu (2011) maintains that Adichie generously draws from the vast oral resources of the Igbo. Particularly, in the *Purple Hibiscus*, Papa Nnukwu snatches the folk narrative from the naive Kambili so as to infuse the grandeur of the fable structure into his tale, which centers on “why the tortoise shell is cracked”. The call and response interaction, the opening and closing formulae and the music, make for useful interlude for the main story. Akachi Adimora – Ezeigbo combines the oral narrative style with that of the western novelistic convention admirably. So, the style markers in Ezeigbo’s narratives are in accordance with the Igbo traditional folktale. Thus, Nwaiwu (2011) concludes that Akachi’s Trilogy is an Igbo novel translated into English.

In African narratives, the audience takes time to narrate their stories as each participant is both a narrator and audience because they take turns to narrate their own stories and become an audience when they stop to listen to other narrators relate their experiences. This is the technique Ezeigbo adopts when the four Oluadas tell the stories of their lives. Again, the story tellers must express their willingness to tell the story while the audience expresses their enthusiasm to listen; as witnessed in Adimora’s *The Last of the Strong Ones*

Folk songs

Awa (2014) maintains that another influence of African tradition in Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones* is her embossing of local songs such as love songs, children songs and war songs. She takes her cues from oral literature. She uses her songs, which are larded with poetic qualities to dignify her women and Igbo culture. After Chieme was sent away by her husband for her childlessness, she determined to live her life to the full. As a result, every morning, she fortifies herself with this song:

You backbiters, Eat your words! You ikpemmongers, Put your tongue in scabbards You slanderers. Stem the tide of your running mouths! I rise high, beyond your malice.

Ezeigbo invents the songs by Ejimnaka and Chieme to depict and typify her kind of women who are noble, positive, confident, fiercely self-determined and unwavering.

Lullaby

Iwokedok (2009) argues that children have been portrayed as passive and quiet observers of adult activities. But many African writers have decided to project children, children literature and particularly lullaby as it promotes cultural continuity and language development. Lullabies are used to sooth and calm children into quiet time and blissful deep sleep and dreams, as a result, lullabies are usually simple and repetitive as seen in the examples given by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo. Egbebere bia nje were o-o-o-o! Egbebere bia nje were o-o-o-o! (P.66)

Here again, Chibuka sings a lullaby thus: My little one please do not cry if you stop crying I will give you the thing a child gives to her younger ones. (P.127)

Marriage Songs

Birth, marriage and burial are considered the three most important family events in most cultures, and Igbo land is not an exception to that. Particularly, the love marriage and marriage songs. They love life and they tend to enjoy it to the fullest. Part of what makes the Igbo enjoy their lives is the songs and music they play or listen to at ceremonies like weddings, child naming ceremonies and so on. The importance or effects of the

marriage songs cannot be overemphasized. In line with this, the African and indeed Nigerian literary artists incorporate Igbo traditional marriage songs in their literary works for ethnic signification and to project the culture and beauty of their people to the world. Thus, in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, as Chieme's age group escorts her home to her husband, they sing:

The maiden's wine, the maidens' wine He has drunk the maiden's wine Iwuchukwu has drunk tombo wine He has drunk the wine of the maidens He has dragged her to his house; She has dragged her to his house She has gone, she has gone to his home; She has gone, she has gone to his home; (p.99)

Music and singing are fundamental features of the culture and life of the Igbo. Since Adichie celebrates Igbo culture in her narratives. She presents two main categories of songs in her prose. They are the war songs and the Christian songs. Creditably the songs are realized in Igbo and this captures the totality of the circumstantial spirit of their performance (Onukaogu and Onyerionwu 2010). There are more of Igbo Christian songs in Adiche's *Purple Hibiscus*; and through these songs, she strengthens the Igboness of the environment that creates them, and domesticates the Christian religion in the Igbo environment.

Examples:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Ekene nke udo
ezigbo nwanne m nye m aka gi. | The greeting of peace
My dear brother give me your hand. (p.246) |
| 2. Ome mma, Chineke
Ome mma | One who does good, God
one who does good (p.48) |
| 3. Ka m bunie afa gi enu... | I will lift your name higher (p.133) |
| 4. I na asi m esona ya! | Are you telling me not to follow Him (p. 186) |

Igbo Proverbs

Proverbs play a very important role in Igbo language and culture. This is why Achebe (1958) says "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten." "(Ilu bụ mmanụ eji eri okwu). It is imperative therefore that a lot of importance is attached to them. These pointed sayings are the accumulated treasure of Ibo philosophy throughout the ages. Proverbs therefore contain the observations, knowledge and wisdom of our fore-fathers who not having developed the art of writing were compelled to condense what they would have put down in writing into a short form that could be easily remembered and passed from generation to generation. A person who uses proverbs and idioms frequently and appropriately is considered to have much wisdom and a command of the language. A good understanding of *Igbo Proverbs* would automatically lead one to an understanding of the Ibo man, his philosophy of life, tradition, culture and mode of living because it is in them that the accumulated knowledge, wisdom, religious belief and experience of the Ibo man throughout his history have been embedded and preserved.

To capture the Igbo folk tradition succinctly, Adichie and Adimora integrate Igbo proverbs but in English in their stories. Even though, the proverbs are rendered in English, they convey Igboness; as they garnish and infect local colour to their stories, as in the following:

- (1) Our people say that after the aku flies, it will fall to the toad. (P.226) Purple
- (2) You are like a fly blindly following a corpse into the grave (P.78) Purple
- (3) When a child is given what he has been clamouring for, restlessness disappears. (P.15) Strong Ones
- (4) A toad does not run in the middle of the day without cause. (P.78) Strong Ones
- (5) We must look for the black goat when it is still daylight. (P.124) Strong Ones
- (6) A skinny person becomes uneasy when a reference is made to a tattered basket. (P.142) Strong ones
- (7) It is the rat in the house that told the bush rat that there is fish in the house. (P.152) Strong Ones
- (8) The hour a farmer begins work is the morning of his day. (P.149) Strong Ones

Looking at the relevance of proverbs, Onukaogu and Onyeonwu (2010:320) sustain that: Proverbs enhance the thematic relevance of the context where it appears and they subtly contribute to the realization and appreciation of the entire story.

This opinion is wholesome looking at the experiences in Adichie's stories. Example (2) becomes prophetic to the calamitous end of Papa, his religious extremism and oppression in the *Purple Hibiscus*, which eventually forms the focal theme of the novel. So, proverbs are mostly indirect remarks on different facets of life (Nwachukwu Agbada in Onukaogu and Onyerionwu 2010). Awa (2014:141) reiterates that Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo incorporates many proverbs to enforce the themes of her work and project the morals, which ought to guide her people and African society for a more cordial, organized and idyllic society. Her proverbs reflect the values of Igbo society such as the need for equality, fairness, justice and love in our society. Also, the importance of hard work, patience, diligence, humility and doggedness as lasting virtues among men and women are emphasized.

III. CONCLUSION

Arts, Literature to be specific, is a tool, a gift that has the capacity to make the invisible visible and the unknown, known. Thus, the African Literary artists aim to project their root and pride, their culture to the world. Subsequently, the literary works of Chimamanda Adichie and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo serve the functions of culture projection and celebration as they elegantly showcase Igbo luscious cuisine, potent traditional religion, items of adornment, fabulous songs and dances and the splendour of African masquerade.

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