

## PROMOTION OF IGBO CULTURE IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S GIRLS AT WAR AND OTHER STORIES

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**RESUME :** *Cet article montre que Chinua Achebe promeut la culture Igbo par la production d'une fiction nouvelliste marquée par un anglais africanisé et une thématique igbophilisée, qui révèlent au mieux les préoccupations d'Achebe à propos de la préservation des valeurs traditionnelles Igbo menacées par la civilisation de l'homme blanc. L'africanisation de l'anglais et l'igbophilisation thématique font de l'auteur un « réinventeur » de la langue et un « adorateur » des ancêtres.*

**MOTS Clés :** Promotion, Culture Igbo, Anglais Africanise, Thematique Igbophilisee, Achebe.

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper shows that Chinua Achebe promotes Igbo culture by producing a short fiction marked by an Africanized English and an Igbophilized thematics, which reveal at best Achebe's preoccupations about the preservation of the Igbo traditional values threatened by the white man's civilization. The "Africanization" of English and the thematic "Igbophilization" make the author into a language "reinventor" and an "ancestor worshipper".*

**KEYWORDS:** Promotion, Igbo culture, Africanized English, Igbophilized thematics, Achebe.

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### INTRODUCTION

Unlike a writer like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who fosters the use of indigenous languages, because he thinks that English and the other European languages are "part of the neo-colonial structures that repress progressive ideas," Chinua Achebe chooses English, "a language with which to talk to one another<sup>1</sup>", in order to help his people to regain the true values which could give society a strong basis. In *Girls at War and Other Stories*, Achebe's first collection of stories, the Igbo culture is promoted so much so that the following question may be asked: How is Igbo culture promoted in the Nigerian short story writer's work? Before looking into the issue raised, the terms "promotion" and "Igbo culture" will be defined. If the word "promotion" means undertaking actions to make something known, to favour and support it, the noun phrase "Igbo culture" is connected with Igbo customs and traditions threatened by colonialism whose impact on African social reality is considered to be the "fundamental problem<sup>2</sup>". Thus, "promoting Igbo culture" has to do with highly valuing the customs and beliefs, way of life and social organization of the Igbo people.

The analysis will be based on narratology construed as the science of the narrative. Thus, such theoretical tools as heterodiegetic, homodiegetic and autodiegetic narrators, plot, "the

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<sup>1</sup>Chinua Achebe, quoted by Wikipedia,

[http://www.fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinua\\_Achebe&ei=br7XU.OHEMaDyw](http://www.fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinua_Achebe&ei=br7XU.OHEMaDyw), accessed on 16 January 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Chinua Achebe, quoted by Djangoné-Bi et R. Okafor, « Chinua Achebe ou la recherche d'une esthétique négro-africaine », in *Colloque sur Littérature et Esthétique Négro-africaine*, Abidjan-Dakar, 1979, p. 352.

sequence of related events composing the narrative<sup>3</sup>”, characters, “the persons who play their part in the narrative<sup>4</sup>”, setting, “the place and time in which the action occurs<sup>5</sup>”, focalization or point of view that “establishes a consistent perspective on the characters and their actions as the narrative unfolds<sup>6</sup>”, style, “the way [the author] uses the multifarious resources of language<sup>7</sup>”, and theme, “the unifying idea that brings to life all the other elements of fiction<sup>8</sup>”, will be zeroed in on in the study. The reflection falls into two parts. The first one describes and analyses an Africanized English, whereas the second one focuses on an Igbophilized thematics.

### An Africanized English

As Djiman Kasimi puts it, Achebe’s originality can be found in his “Africanization”<sup>9</sup> of English. He writes the following:

To turn the spotlight on the specific case of Chinua Achebe, what makes his *oeuvre* so compelling and appealing is this local, African flavour it is tinged with. What is being driven at is that the author of *No Longer at Ease* (1960) writes in English to tell English people that he is no English. The point being raised is that his works forcefully bring into the open his African culture and identity<sup>10</sup>.

The expression “Africanization of English”, can be viewed as a literary device by which “[...] many African writers like Achebe are reinventing the language of their oppressors to tell their own stories and retell their collective histories<sup>11</sup>.” Talking about African writers writing in English, Achebe himself says this which shows his intention to “Africanize” Shakespeare’s language in his works: “The English of the African will have to be a new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings<sup>12</sup>.” Achebe

<sup>3</sup> Ann Charters, *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, Third Edition, Boston, Bedford Books of St Martin’s Press, 1991, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> The notion of “Africanization of English” is borrowed from E. G. Bokamba, in Bokamba, E. G. (1982), “The Africanization of English”, Kachru, B. B. (Ed), *The Other Tongue. English Across Cultures*, Champaign, IL: U of Illinois Press, pp. 77-98. Quoting Bokamba, Adedimeji deals with the concept of “Africanization of English” in Achebe’s works when he writes the following: “Achebe, like the other African writers, has evolved a sort of African English: an English that mostly uses the English lexicon but whose usage have been invested with values, concepts and nuances of local patterns of everyday African linguistic patterns. The language is like the old wine of African ideas and expressions brewed in the new bottle of English language,” in “Culture and Language in African Literature: A Study of Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God*”, <http://www.antiessays.com/free-essays/454774.html> (accessed on 04 January 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Djiman Kasimi, “Chinua Achebe as a Postcolonial Writer”, in *Remembering Chinua Achebe*, Ed. DJIMAN Kasimi, Cocody-Abidjan, Centre de Reprographie de l’Enseignement Supérieur de l’Université Félix HOUPOUET BOIGNY de Cocody-Abidjan, Novembre 2013, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Kristina S. Ten, “Vehicle for Story: Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o on defining African Literature, Preserving Culture and Self”, <http://www.studentpulse.com/article/530/vehicles-for-story-chinua-achebe-and-ng>, (accessed on 07 January 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Jayalakshmi V. Rao, “Culture through Language in the Novels of Chinua Achebe”, <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/achebe/jrao1.html>, (accessed on 08 January 2014).

“Africanizes” the English language by the use of Igbo names and expressions, Pidgin English, Igbo songs and proverbs.

### **Igbo Names and Expressions**

“Chike’s School Days” offers an example of the use of Igbo name whose meaning is translated into English in the text. “Obiajulu” is one of the names given to Chike when he was born in a family in which there are five daughters. This name was given Chike because he is the unique son of Amos and Sarah. “Obiajulu” is an indigenous name meaning “the mind at last is at rest”:

The child receives three names at his baptism -- John, Chike, Obiajulu. The last name means ‘the mind at last is at rest.’ Anyone hearing this name knew at once that its owner was either an only child or an only son. Chike was an only son. His parents [Amos and Sarah] had had five daughters before him. (p. 35)

“The mind at last is at rest” simply because Chike was not born a girl, so his birth as a boy is a sort of relief for his parents who, from now on, have no worries, since the baby boy they are awaiting has finally arrived after a series of five daughters. The long-awaited “son and heir” has come after a period of time which seems like eternity. The delight that Chike’s birth brings to his family reveals the Igbos’ strong desire for male children, an aspect of their cultural values<sup>13</sup>: “Sarah’s last child was a boy, and his birth brought great joy to the house of his father, Amos.” (p. 35).

Indigenous expressions are also used in the text in order to further “Africanize” the English language. In “Chike’s School Day’s”, the diviner, whom Elizabeth, Chike’s father’s mother, consults in order to find a cure for her son who “has joined the white man’s religion” (p. 37), and who wants to marry an *Osu* girl, Sarah, has a “*nwifulu*,” a talking calabash. The latter is part of his consultation devices: “He cast his cowries a number of times and wrote with a finger on a bowl of sand, and all the while his *nwifulu*, a talking calabash chatted to itself.” (p. 37) In “Akueke”, a plotless narrative, the third-person narrator, who is omniscient because he or she sees into all the characters, says that Akueke’s grandfather was waiting for all his six grandchildren he summoned in his “*Obi*”: “He was waiting in his *Obi* when his grandchildren arrived.” (p. 33) Here, it can be noted that the all-knowing narrator adopts an omniscient or zero focalization which shows him as a god knowing everything about the paper beings in the story being analyzed. What is being meant is that the piece of information provided about the venue mentioned admits of no doubt. Indeed, the place where the scene is happening is undoubtedly referred to by the Igbo morpheme the “*Obi*”. The “*Obi*” is an indigenous word meaning “hut”. Since it is not an English term, it has been italicized in the text. In addition, the storyteller uses the expression “two or three moons” to refer to the two or three month’s period which has elapsed after the death of Akueke, a protagonist who is both round and flat: “Two or three moons passed and their grandfather sent a messenger to Umuofia to ascertain whether it was true that Akueke was dead.” (p. 32). Achebe could have used the expression “two or three months”, but he did not do it because, as an African storyteller, he draws his linguistic materials from oratory or from his people’s oral tradition in order to tell his story. The use of such an expression gives the author’s language and style an indigenous flavour and

<sup>13</sup> Ode Ogede, “Oral Tradition and Modern Storytelling: Revising Chinua Achebe’s Short Stories”, <http://www.journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/IFR/article/view/7692/8749>, *The International Fiction Review*, Volume 28, Numbers 1 and 2, 2001, (accessed on 16 January 2014).

strength, as J. V. Rao writes: “The use of idioms lends Achebe’s language and style a native flavor and force. Besides giving us a close and convincing picture of a society in transition, this technique helps his characters sound natural while speaking an alien tongue<sup>14</sup>.” Achebe’s English gets further “Africanized” by the use of Pidgin English, Igbo songs and proverbs.

### **Pidgin English, Igbo Songs and Proverbs**

The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines “Pidgin English” as “a simple form of language, especially English [...] with a limited number of words, that are used together with words from a local language” (p. 877). From this definition, it can be deduced that “Pidgin English” is a language which is mixed with the words or grammar of another language. In Achebe’s short fiction, English is mixed with indigenous languages, as can be seen in this extract of “The Voter”, in which a policeman uses Pidgin English, the Nigerian *lingua franca* spoken by most people of the town, to ask the electoral officer if Rufus Okeke is “giving birth to a child” in the voting booth, since he is taking too much time inside: “At this point he heard the muffled voice of the policeman asking the electoral officer what the man was doing inside? ‘Abi na pickin im de born?’” (p. 19) Here, it is important to point out that Achebe’s adaptation of the language to the speaker is all the more interesting that it is a policeman who is expressing himself in Pidgin English, “this localized West African medium,”<sup>15</sup> a language of the people. To succeed in adapting English to the needs of its user, two things are necessary: first, having a sound knowledge of the borrowed language in order to be able to dominate and transform it, and second, one must master one’s own language and culture. Achebe satisfies these two requirements. That is why he achieves success so admirably by infusing into English a new vigour<sup>16</sup>. Another strategy through which Achebe “Africanizes” English is the recourse to songs transcribed into Igbo.

In “Chike’s School Days”, three excerpts in which songs are transliterated into Igbo can be mentioned. In the first extract, Chike, who starts attending the village school, has the following remembrance, as the narrator puts it:

But as the first day of the new term approached, his young mind dwelt on the many stories about teachers and their canes. And he remembered the song his elder sisters sang, a song that had a somewhat diquieting (sic) refrain:

*Onye nkuzi ewelu itali piagbusie umuaka.* (p. 38)

The chorus above, that is the part of a song that is repeated after each verse, is not written in English. It is rather a transcription of a sentence into Igbo language, which highlights one manner in which this people emphasizes things through a hyperbole, that is a way of speaking that makes something sound better, more exciting or dangerous than it really is. In other words, it is an exaggeration. Here, the point being made is that the teacher beats severely the school children to death, which is an overstatement, a distortion of facts in the song: “One of the ways an emphasis is laid in Ibo is by exaggeration, so that the teacher in the refrain might not actually have flogged the children to death. But there was no doubt he did flog them. And Chike thought very much about it.” (p. 38)

<sup>14</sup> Jayalakshmi V. Rao, “Culture through Language in the Novels of Chinua Achebe”, *op. cit.*, (accessed on 08 January 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Djiman Kasimi, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Djangoné-Bi N. et R. Okafor, *op. cit.*, p. 345.

In the second instance, during the catechism lesson, the way in which Chike and his school friends sing and dance the teacher's question related to Julius Caesar (100-44 B.C.E), is narrated:

During the catechism lesson the class formed a ring to dance the teacher's question. 'Who was Caesar?' he might ask, and the song would burst forth with much stamping of feet.

*Siza bu eze Rome*

*Onye nachi enu uwa dum.* (p. 38)

« *Siza bu eze Rome* » and « *Onye nachi enu uwa dum* », the answers to the question ('Who was Caesar?'), are Igbo terms meaning respectively "Caesar was the chief of Rome", and "the ruler of the whole world", which is not true in the twentieth century, as pointed out in the story: "It did not matter to their dancing that in the twentieth century Caesar was no longer ruler of the whole world." (p. 39) The third passage shows a song sung in English. But judging from the way in which Achebe transcribes it, one feels that that song is not sung in English but rather in Igbo language, as can be noted in the following:

And sometimes they even sang in English. Chike was very fond of 'Ten Green Bottles'. They had been taught the words but they only remembered the first and the last lines. The middle was hummed and hie-ed and mumbled:

*Ten grin botr angin on dar war,*

*Ten grin botr angin on dar war,*

*Hm hm hm hm hm*

*Hm hm hm hm hm hm*

*An ten grin botr angin on dar war.* (p. 39)

The English words "green", "bottles", "hanging", "that" and "wall" in the British children's song entitled "Ten Green Bottles", undergo an orthographic mutilation so that they are respectively transcribed thus: "grin" "botr", "angin", "dar" and "war". Desemantized, "grin" means "smile", whereas "war" signifies "conflict". But these meanings are not the ones intended in the song. As for "botr", "angin" and "dar" they are meaningless in English and appear as a sort of "Africanization" or "Igbophilization"<sup>17</sup> of these terms. Moreover, the peculiar spelling of the words from the song tells the addressee more about the external focalization being used because the narrator only reports the outside appearances of the story. By the external focalization, the reader is kept waiting since he is not provided with any piece of information giving him an insight into the meaning of the misspelling. In point of fact, the misspelled writing refers to the mispronunciation of the Igbo children who are learners of Shakespeare's language. In short well-known statements that give practical advice about life,

<sup>17</sup> The term "Igbophilization" is framed from Bello-Kano's "Achebe was an Igbophile", in Ibrahim Bello-Kano, "Achebe was an Igbophile, Not the Father of African Literature", *Daily Post: Nigerian Online Newspaper* 28 March 2013, <http://www.dailypost.com.ng/2013/03/28/Ibrahim-bello-kano-achebe-was-an-igbophile-not-the-father-of-african-literatur>, (accessed on 12 June 2013), quoted by Nick Mdika Tembo, "Chinua Achebe and the Politics of African Literary 'Fatherhood'" in *Remembering Chinua Achebe*, op. cit., p. 21.

the storyteller “Africanizes” his language even more. These sentences are nothing but Igbo proverbs.

Achebe gives advice to his reader or says something that is generally true by resorting to Igbo proverbs through which the wisdom of his ancestors is expressed. The diviner consulted by Old Elizabeth, who seeks a medicine for curing her son afflicted with insanity because of his conversion to the white man’s religion, warns Amos’s father about the drawbacks of his abandoning his ancestors’ ways, and his turning to Christianity. This warning is expressed in this Igbo proverb: “Those who gather ant-infested faggots must be prepared for the visit of lizards.” (p. 37) What is meant by this saying is that one must always pay for the negative consequences of one’s deeds. The Europeans put the idea this way: “They that sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind” or “He who sows the wind, reaps the storm”. Achebe “Africanizes” this proverb when he puts it in the African context through the use of words such as “ant-infested faggots” and “lizards”, which are things, insects and reptiles that can be seen in rural areas of Africa, precisely in Igbo-land. Being visited by lizards attracted by the ants contained in a bunch of sticks tied together, used for burning on a fire, is tantamount to saying that one gets into trouble when one does a reprehensible act.

“Dead Men’s Path”, Achebe’s tenth story in *Girls at War and Other Stories*, contains another Igbo proverb which encapsulates his people’s notion of tolerance that is required if one wants Christianity, the white man’s religion, and the indigenous/local customs and traditions to coexist peacefully. Indeed, appointed as the new headmaster of Ndume Central School, Michael Obi, who is known for “his passion for ‘modern methods’” (p. 78), makes out an old woman crossing the school yard by using “an almost disused path from the village across the school compound to the bush on the other side.” (p. 80) Preoccupied by what the Government Education Officer will think of this path when he visits the school, and above all because he is afraid by the idea that the villagers might “decide to use the schoolroom for a pagan ritual during the inspection” (p. 81), Michael Obi makes the footpath closed. A few days later he is visited by the village priest of *Ani* who begs him to reopen the path. Michael Obi says no to him, and tells him that the mission of the school which he is running is to completely get the educated people rid of these beliefs, and that dead men do not need footpaths. He says: “The whole purpose of our school [...] is to eradicate just such beliefs as that. Dead men do not require footpaths. The whole idea is just fantastic. Our duty is to teach your children to laugh at such ideas.” (p. 81)

The priest of *Ani* concedes to Michael Obi the point, but holds the view that what the villagers do is simply to follow the practices of their ancestors. That is why he begs the school headmaster to open again the path, which will prevent any crisis<sup>18</sup> between the inhabitants and the school, as shown through the following utterances: “What you say may be true [...] but we follow the practices of our fathers. If you re-open the path we shall have nothing to quarrel about. What I always say is: let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch.” (pp. 81-82) Michael Obi refuses to “let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch”, that is to tolerate the villagers’ religion which he refers to as “pagan ritual”, by not accepting to re-open the ancestral path through which the locals will keep on practicing their spirituality by following the customs and traditions of their fathers. The protagonist’s intolerance has brought the inhabitants to sack the

<sup>18</sup> The term “crisis” refers to the clash of the Western and African cultures, a conflict caused by the introduction of Christianity and schooling as the primary institutions of Europeanization in Africa. I have discussed this topic in an article entitled: « La crise des valeurs culturelles africaines dans “Dead Men’s Path” de Chinua Achebe », in *Remembering Chinua Achebe, op. cit.*, pp. 87-99.

school, because they think that the death in childbirth of a young woman, which happened two days later, was due to the fact that “the path of children coming in to be born” had been closed by the school headmaster. Actually, Michael Obi, who has forgotten that “wherever something stands, another thing stands<sup>19</sup>”, has brought “ant-infested faggots into the school and consequently has received the visit of lizards.” At this point of the analysis, it can be observed that Achebe’s Igbo proverbs contain such elements as “ants”, “lizards”, “hawks” and “eagles”, which are invertebrates and vertebrates. Both “hawks” and “eagles” are large birds that kill other animals for food. Used in the Igbo proverbs, they appear as didactic leaving creatures through which the storyteller can pass on a message to the reader. They transform the sayings into wildlife metaphors which capture the narratee’s interest and imagination. Therefore, it may be asserted that Achebe’s style is an authentic one, since it gives the reader a fascinating insight into the culture of his people. This contention is corroborated by Melissa Culross’s presentation of contemporary authors in which the following is noted about Achebe’s creative style:

Achebe’s style is one of the most well regarded styles of current authors, nearly revolutionary in impact. Although it may have a defamiliarizing effect upon some readers because of its stark simplicity, it is actually full of depth and complexity despite appearances. Very realistic and brief, it conveys as close as possible in English the language also spoken by the Ibo. By sprinkling the language with proverbs and other cultural references, Achebe slowly and naturally introduces the reader to Ibo culture<sup>20</sup>.

Within the Igbo culture, “proverbs are [believed to be] the palm oil with which words are eaten<sup>21</sup>.” As such, they add substance to what a speaker says and make him into a master of speech. By integrating skillfully his people’s proverbial wisdom into his short stories, Achebe shows the readership that he is an expert in the Igbo conversation art. A critic like Simon Gikandi praises Achebe adamantly because the Igbo proverbs give his writing such a particular mark: “Achebe ... invented African literature, because he was able to show ... that the future of African writing did not lie in simple imitation of European forms but in the fusion of such forms with oral tradition<sup>22</sup>.” Beyond all the linguistic features which Achebe displays through the Igbo names, idioms, songs, proverbs, and Pidgin English, what is further promoted is the culture of his people, that is to say the traditional society considered as one that has its own particular beliefs and ways of behaving, traditions, practices, etc. All these are better grasped through an Igbophilized thematics.

### **An Igbophilized Thematics**

Written between 1952 and 1972, Achebe’s *Girls at War and Other Stories*, a collection of 13 short stories drawn from literary journals and magazines, shows the short-story writer’s Igbophilized thematics exemplifying Achebe’s concerns for the preservation of Igbo traditional culture. These thematic preoccupations can be observed through the traces of the Igbo-based themes developed in the stories. Indeed, the work under study deals with life in post-colonial Nigeria where the diversity of Igbo culture is highlighted, and the conflict between traditional

<sup>19</sup> Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*, London, Heinemann, 1960, p. 145.

<sup>20</sup> Melissa Culross, “Chinua Achebe’s Biography and Style”, <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/achebe/achebebio.html>, (accessed on 08 February 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Chinua Achebe, quoted by Jayalakshmi V. Rao, *op. cit.*, (accessed on 08 January 2014). This proverb can also be seen in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Ibadan, Heinemann, 1958, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Simon Gikandi, quoted by Djiman Kazimi, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

Nigerian beliefs and modernism brought by British colonialism is discussed and examined<sup>23</sup>. As a microcosm of African civilization, the Igbo culture is portrayed through such aspects as customary marriage, wives, children and their education, the veneration of deities, belief in superstitions, ostracism and the *Osu* caste system. From these, it may be deduced that an Igbophilized thematics, one which features prominently Igbo customs and traditions, really is at work in Achebe's *Girls at War and Other Stories*.

### **Traditional Marriage, Wives, Children and Their Education**

In Igbo-land traditional marriage is only valid when two conditions are satisfied. First, it must be arranged by the parents of the admirer. Second, the woman wooed must belong to the same tribe as the suitor. In "Marriage is a Private Affair" Nnaemeka's father opposes his son's marriage with Nene because the norms governing this traditional institution are not respected. In their conversation about the marriage, Nnaemeka raises the question by telling Nene the following words: "Yes. They [the parents] are most unhappy if the engagement is not arranged by them. In our case it's worse -- you are not even an Ibo." (p. 20) Not only does Nnaemeka break the rules concerning his union with Nene in that the engagement is not done by his family, but also because his wife is a stranger.

Nene, a teacher in a Girl's School in Lagos, does not understand why a person's tribe should play an important role in marriage matters. That is the reason why she considers this criterion as a joke, something she can laugh at as a city-dweller: "In the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city it had always seemed to her something of a joke that a person's tribe could determine whom he married." (p. 21) But as Nnaemeka puts it, despite their openness to other people, the question of marriage within their tribe is a serious one for the Igbos. The point is raised in the dialogue between Nnaemeka and Nene, as shown in the excerpt below:

'You don't' really mean that he [Nnaemeka's father] will object to your marrying me simply on that account? I had always thought you Ibos were kindly-disposed to other people.' 'So we are. But when it comes to marriage, well it's not quite so simple. And this,' he added, 'is not peculiar to the Ibos. If your father were alive and lived in the heart of Ibibio-land he would be exactly like my father.' (p. 21)

The point being made by Nnaemeka in the passage above is that each tribe has its own cultural values, and what Okeke, the protagonist's father, is doing in Igbo-land is just to follow his people's ways as far as marriage is concerned, as Nene's father would do in Ibibio-land if he were not dead. Through the two repetitions of the term "father", the reader is shown that the two parents are the repositories of their ancestors' customs and traditions in which marriage appears as a tribal matter. Today, in the modern world, particularly in the city of Lagos, marriage has become a private affair, as Nnaemeka says: "Marriage today is different..." (p. 22) For Nnaemeka, since it is a business concerning only his wife and himself, neither his father nor his family should have their say in his engagement with Nene. That is why he refuses to marry Ugoye Nweke, an Igbo girl his father has found for him. Nnaemeka tells his father that he does not love Ugoye Nweke. But Okeke retorts that love is not required in his people's vision of marriage which is a communal or tribal affair: "Look here, my son [...] nothing is

<sup>23</sup>Anne Taylor, "Girls at War and Other Stories by Chinua Achebe," <http://www.brainwavez.org/books/reviews/20100528001-01.html>, (accessed on 16 January 2014).

different. What one looks for in a wife are a good character and a Christian background” (p. 22).

For having opposed the traditional rule concerning marriage, Nnaemeka and Nene must pay for their affront. Not only does Okeke boycott the marriage, but also people from Igbo-land as well as those living in Lagos, especially Igbo women, through their behaviour, show Nene their hostility and their discontent. The couple’s predicament is described as follows:

The prejudice against Nnaemeka’s marriage was not confined to his little village. In Lagos, especially among his people who worked there, it showed itself in a different way. Their women, when they met at their village meeting, were not hostile to Nene. Rather, they paid her such excessive deference as to make her feel she was not one of them. (p. 26)

The protagonist and his wife fail to understand that no individual can get the better of the community, as prescribed in the Igbo customs. About this customary law, David Cook writes the following: “In a village there are very few places where an essentially private existence can be pursued. Contribution to the life and welfare of the community is the greatest good; and hence individualism is seen as negative<sup>24</sup>.” Achebe himself expresses this idea in his repeated proverb: “[...] no man however great was greater than his people; [...] no one ever won judgment against his clan<sup>25</sup>.” As a large group of families that are related to one another, the Igbo tribe values wives, children and their education.

In the Igbo traditional society, men’s wives are very important. The children they give birth to are also of great value. “Uncle Ben’s Choice” encapsulates the importance of both wives and their offspring in the climax of the story, as well as in its falling action. Indeed, one night, on returning home from the African Club on one New Year’s Eve, the first-person narrator finds in his bed a woman who “was hundred per cent naked” (p. 86). Since he is very much exhausted, he does not look for his lamp. But in the dark bedroom he starts touching her and asking her questions about her identity. Afraid because he gets no answers, he strikes a match and discovers that it was not an ordinary woman. So he runs away to Matthew Obi’s house. In the conversation with this neighbour, he realizes that he “had been visited by Mami Wota, the Lady of the River Niger.” (p. 88) Matthew Obi further mentions that one can have two types of attitudes when one meets Mami Wota: either you have sex with her and you become rich or you refuse to sleep with her and you show that you are a dignified follower of your father’s ways. Jolly Ben, the homodiegetic and autodiegetic narrator, a character taking part in the story in which he is the hero, narrates the incident:

Matthew said again: ‘It depends what you want in life. If it is wealth you want then you made a great mistake today, but if you are a true son of your father then take my hand.’ We shook hands and he said: ‘Our fathers never told us that a man should prefer wealth instead of wives and children.’ (p. 88)

In the excerpt above, the internal focalization is used as a scriptural device inviting the reader to focus on an important detail: the standpoint of the Igbos about money. This narrative technique brings into the limelight the speaker’s subjective perspective highlighting the ethos of the Igbos. To put it differently, the set of attitudes and beliefs typical of Achebe’s people are conveyed in Matthew Obi’s point of view given in the aforementioned utterances. As a matter

<sup>24</sup> David Cook, *African Literature: A Critical View*, London, Longman, 1977, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Chinua Achebe, quoted by Umelo Ojinmah, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

of fact, through his words (“Our fathers never told us that a man should prefer wealth instead of wives and children”), Matthew Obi means that the ancestors of the Igbo people did not encourage the scramble for material at the expense of wives and children. On the contrary, the latter are much more prominent, and valued in the traditional society in which human beings are the best riches. In other words, people believe in the primacy of the family, as expressed through this proverb explaining the spiritual wisdom of the Igbos: “He who has people is richer than he who has money<sup>26</sup>”. Here, it may be observed that the Igbo culture is “people-centered”, as compared with the white man’s which is based on materialism and acquisitiveness. For this reason, Ode Ogede asserts: “The logic here is that Igbo (African) culture is people-centered and places primacy upon the value of children, as opposed to modern European culture, which is materialistic and acquisitive<sup>27</sup>”. In the modern society, this traditional value is given a pounding because of the primacy of the material riches over the moral ones. A typical illustration of the choice for materialism and the rejection of the human capital is shown through the case of Dr J. M. Stuart-Young, who is depicted as “a crazy white man”, who chooses wealth instead of children, as narrated in the aforementioned story:

For where is the man who will choose wealth instead of children? Except a crazy white man like Dr J. M. Stuart-Young. Oh, I didn’t tell you. The same night that I drove Mami Wota out she went to Dr J. M. Stuart-Young, a white merchant and became his lover. You have heard of him? ... Oh yes, he became the richest man in the whole country. But she did not allow him to marry. When he died, what happened? All his wealth went to outsiders. Is that good wealth? I ask you. God forbid. (p. 89)

As shown in the extract above, which is the closure of the story, that is one basic pattern of the plot, except the incipit or the beginning and the middle, Dr J. M. Stuart-Young embodies men’s unbridled scramble for materialism in the modern African society. Unlike Jolly Ben who chooses wives and children, as advocated by the Igbo traditional society, this flat character decides to have sexual intercourse with Mami Wota, and becomes the wealthiest man in the whole country. This pact signed with the river creature, a woman who is very attractive but also dangerous, prevents him from getting married and having children. Having no wives and offspring or heirs, all his riches go to people who are not part of his family. What Achebe is showing the reader as a storyteller is that ill-gotten wealth never profits. The most important thing in society should not be money but rather human being, that is to say wives and children.

Children’s education is the preoccupation of the whole community in the Igbo traditional society. In “Chike’s School Days”, Sarah, Chike’s mother, who has converted herself to Christianity, fails to follow this cultural norm. That is the reason why she forbids her son to eat their neighbours’ food which is considered “heathen food” (p. 3), that is one that is given to idols. By behaving so she “set herself against the age-old custom which regarded children as the common responsibility of all so that, no matter what the relationship between parents, their children played together and shared their food.” (p. 35) Here, the reader is informed that in the past the education of children was carried out by society at large, so it was not the business of parents alone.

However, Sarah’s attitude can be explained by the fact that she and her husband are Christians who reject their traditions in order to adopt the white man’s ways, as the heterodiegetic says:

<sup>26</sup> Chinua Achebe, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>27</sup> Ode Ogede, *op. cit.*, (accessed on 16 January 2014).

“Like his sisters Chike was brought up ‘in the ways of the white man,’ which meant the opposite of traditional.” (p. 35). The advent of Christianity in Africa leads to the loss of the Igbo cultural values. Achebe wants to regenerate the latter so he shows his people’s religious practices through the worshipping of deities and belief in superstitions.

### **Worshipping of Deities and Belief in Superstitions**

Before the arrival of Christianity in Africa, Africans, particularly the Igbos, had their own religious practices which can be appreciated through the worshipping of their gods, their deities, by the help of their spirits and priests. For example, in “The Sacrificial Egg”, Kitikpa, the smallpox disease, is shown as an evil deity who has come to avenge the gods of the soil offended by the bad state of the town, especially the Nkwo market which is very dirty by want of cleaning. Of this unfortunate situation, the third-person narrator says the following: “Such was the state of the town when Kitikpa came to see it and to demand the sacrifice the inhabitants owed the gods of the soil. He came in confident knowledge of the terror he held over the people. He was an evil deity, and boasted it.” (p. 44)

As an “evil deity”, Kitikpa kills the people who fail to fulfil their duty concerning the cleaning of the Nkwo market, since what they are interested in is business, which is making money. It must be noted that in the past that evil deity did not clamp down on the village people since the latter played their role of cleaning the market. But “progress”, that is to say civilization and modernization, has brought about a negative change which has transformed the Nkwo market into a commercial no man’s-land in which the sons of the soil played a harmful role, because they called for change in their prayers, as pointed out by the heterodiegetic narrator:

When Umuru was a little village, there was an age-grade who swept its market-square every Nkwo day. But progress had turned it into a busy, sprawling, crowded and dirty river port, a no man’s-land where strangers outnumbered by far the sons of the soil, who could do nothing about it except shake their heads at this gross perversion of their prayer. (pp. 43-44)

The “prayer” being meant in the passage above is one that Umuru’s inhabitants addressed to the god money in order to call for “their town to grow and prosper.” (p. 44) As a result, the “bad growth and bad prosperity,” that is “bad progress”, and not the good one, leads Kitikpa, the evil deity, to act and kill people who are only interested in their selfish interests, not in the well-being of the whole community. In “Dead Men’s Path”, the villagers worship their deities by using the ancestral footpath as the symbol of the link between the gods, the spirits and the people of Ndume. The priest of *Ani* tells Michael Obi the importance of this way on which the whole life of the village depends:

Look here, my son,’ said the priest bringing down his walking-stick, ‘this path was here before you were born and before your father was born. The whole life of this village depends on it. Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it. But most important, it is the path of children coming in to be born... (p. 81)

The priest of *Ani* is an old man appearing as a traditional authority who performs religious duties and ceremonies in the Igbos’ system of beliefs in gods. Except this particular religion, Achebe shows another aspect of his people’s culture marked by belief in superstitions.

Like most civilizations, the Igbo culture has its superstitions, the beliefs in occult powers and in particular events bringing good or bad luck, based on old ideas of magic. "The Madman" describes a character in jeopardy because of superstitions. Indeed, Nwibe, the protagonist, is a rich man who wants to take the ozo title, as indicated in the extract below:

Nwibe was a man of high standing in Ogbu and was rising higher; a man of wealth and integrity. He had just given notice to all the ozo men of the town that he proposed to seek admission into their honoured hierarchy in the coming initiation season. (p. 3)

But one day, on his way back from his field, Nwibe goes to a stream to have a bath. A madman, who is around trying to get water to quench his thirst, takes his clothes while he is bathing. Completely naked, Nwibe runs after him in order to get his clothes back. Without realizing Nwibe is inside the Eke market still looking for the madman who has his cloth. He is recognized by two people who try to prevent him from setting his feet on "the occult territory of the powers of the market":

He was only vaguely aware of crowds of people on all sides and he appealed to them tearfully without stopping: 'Hold the madman, he's got my cloth!' [...] Farther up the road on the very brink of the market-place two men from Nwibe's village recognized him and, throwing down the one his long basket of yams, the other his calabash of palm-wine held on a loop, gave desperate chase, to stop him setting foot irrevocably within the occult territory of the powers of the market. (pp. 7-8)

People, who have seen Nwibe running naked after another man that is the real lunatic, think that Nwibe has become a madman. In fact, the protagonist is not mad, he has simply answered the call of the market-place, a setting symbolizing superstition and misfortune in the Igbo traditions. As a result, he is no more the same man:

For how could a man be the same again of whom witnesses from all the lands of Olu and Igbo have once reported that they saw today a fine, hefty man in his prime, stark naked, tearing through the crowds to answer the call of the market-place? Such a man is marked for ever. (p. 10)

By setting feet on "the occult territory of the [Eke] market," Nwibe, like the "madman who of his own accord delivers himself to the divinities of the market-place," (p. 10), has become an *osu*, as the first medicine-man consulted by Nwibe's relatives says:

[...] It is like a man who runs away from the oppression of his fellows to the grove of an alusi and says to him: Take me, oh spirit, I am your *osu*. No one can touch him thereafter. He is free and yet no power can break his bondage. He is free of men but bonded to god. (p. 9)

The protagonist is shown not as a static character but as a dynamic one, because he changed from being a wealthy man to a "madman" and a pariah. Nwibe is now an "outcast" who cannot join the community of titled men in his village. As can be noticed, the Igbos are superstitious people who believe in occult influences, in misfortunes, which can jeopardize a person's project and life. Nwibe falls victim of superstition, and beyond his becoming an "outcast," the reader can view a traditional society which is even more marked by ostracism and the *Osu* caste system.

### Ostracism and the *Osu* Caste System

The Igbo traditional society is an exclusionary one, as portrayed in “Akueke” and in “Chike’s School Days.” In “Akueke,” Akueke, the eponymous character in the story, is very sick so she is ostracized, that is excluded from the village, and brought to the “bad bush” in order to prevent the anger of *Ani* on the whole family and on the village. Akueke’s plight is described in the excerpt below:

At last they took counsel together and decided with heavy hearts that Akueke had been stricken with the swelling disease which was an abomination to the land [...] This went on for a whole day, and there was a real danger that she might die in the house and bring down the anger of *Ani* on the whole family, if not the entire village. Neighbours came in and warned the brothers of the grave danger to which they were exposing the nine villages of Umuofia. In the evening they carried her into the bad bush. They had constructed a temporary shelter and a rough bed for her. She was now silent from exhaustion and hate and they left her and went away. (p. 32)

To the Igbos when a person suffers from the swelling disease, a sort of incurable malady, he or she must be excluded from the village and sent to the “bad bush” because this sickness is thought to be abominable, that is extremely bad for the land. If this is not done and the sick person dies in the house, this can attract the anger of the Earth goddess on the whole family as well as on the nine villages of Umuofia. To prevent *nso ani*<sup>28</sup> from being committed, Akueke is ostracized by her six brothers and the whole village, and exposed to wild animals in the “bad bush.” Such a cultural practice is cruel and shows one negative side of the Igbo traditions and customs. Another bad aspect of this culture is related to the *Osu* caste system.

The *Osu* caste system is an organized set of rules in which the individual called *Osu* is an outcast, that is to say someone who will not be accepted by other people as a member of society. In “Chike’s School Days,” Chike’s father, Amos, has become an *Osu* because he has married Sarah, an *Osu* woman. This is an abomination because in the traditional society such a marriage was not celebrated. Today people dare break this cultural rule owing to their conversion to Christianity, the white man’s religion.

In the name of Christianity, Chike is not afraid to refuse to eat the food his neighbour offers him, because he thinks the latter gives her food to idols. The neighbour is shocked to see that, at the present time, an *Osu* like Chike has regained dignity, “thanks to the white man”. The extract below deals with this change as well as the way in which the *Osu* caste system functioned in the past:

One day a neighbour offered a piece of yam to Chike, who was only four years old. The boy shook his head haughtily and said, ‘We don’t eat heathen food.’ The neighbour was full of rage, but she controlled herself and only muttered under her breath that even an *Osu* was full of pride nowadays, thanks to the white man. And she was right. In the past an *Osu* could not raise his shaggy head in the presence of the free-born. He was a slave to one of the many gods of the clan. He was a thing set apart, not to be venerated but to be despised and almost

<sup>28</sup> *Nso ani* is a crime against the earth. A person found guilty of such an offence is severely punished by the Earth Goddess. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo’s family is symbolically destroyed when he commits *nso ani* by putting an end to a male relative’s life by accident, in *Chinua Achebe: New Perspectives*, op. cit., p. 18.

spat at. He could not marry a free-born, and he could not take any of the titles of his clan. When he died, he was buried by his kind in the Bad Bush. Now all that had changed, or had begun to change. So that an *Osu* child could even look down his nose at a free-born, and talk about heathen food! The white man had indeed accomplished many things. (p. 36).

As can be seen, in the Igbo traditional society, the *Osu* caste system was in force. Unlike the free-born who receives a dignified burial when he or she dies, the *Osu*, considered as a slave to the gods of the clan, and as “a thing set apart, not to be venerated but to be despised and almost spat at,” is buried in the “Bad Bush”. Here, the “Bad Bush” symbolizes a setting of exclusion where the outcasts of the society are sent. But nowadays the *Osu* caste system has ceased to apply, because of the advent of Christianity. The latter has caused the loss of the traditional cultural values, as expressed in the last sentence of the passage above: “The white man had indeed accomplished many things.” And like the narrator referring to Chike’s father’s making himself *Osu* by marrying an *Osu* woman in the name of Christianity, one can assert that in the contemporary society “everything is upside down” (p. 38).

The Igbo cultural values whether good or bad have become obsolete since they got in touch with the Western culture. What the storyteller is doing through the short stories from *Girls at War and Other Stories* is to preserve these traditions and customs by portraying both their positive and negative sides. For, like the assassination of twins, the exclusion of sick people affected by incurable sicknesses, and the *Osu* caste system are all tradition-based practices through which Achebe depicts both the traditional Igbo society and its culture, as Nonyelum Chibuzo Mba writes:

The killing of twins, ostracising of people suffering from deadly diseases and the caste system (*osu*) are all tradition based. The realistic presentation of the above issues by Achebe is not to further downgrade the Africans in the eyes of the Europeans but to show the traditional Igbo society and her culture<sup>29</sup>.

The quote above implies that Achebe’s depiction of the Igbo culture is authentic since it shows his tradition’s strengths and weaknesses. These are proofs that Achebe is a truthful witness and storyteller. John Keats’s lines reveal Achebe’s compositional neutrality and impartiality: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all you know on earth, and all you need to know<sup>30</sup>”. In other terms, because of the author’s objectivity and artistic honesty, the prose discourse exhibited here is beautiful. Likewise, with an Igbo-philized thematics and an Africanized English, Achebe’s short fiction is embellished.

## CONCLUSION

By resorting to an Africanized English and an Igbo-philized thematics, the Nigerian short-story writer has greatly valued his people’s traditions and customs. Thus, Igbo names, phrases and proverbs, Pidgin English, as well as Igbo songs, have all appeared as scriptural devices used for the “Africanization” of Shakespeare’s language. Achebe’s keen liking for the Igbo-land and its cultural values accounts for the thematic Igbo-philization in which the “good as well as [...]

<sup>29</sup> Nonyelum Chibuzo Mba, “Exploration of Achebe’s Thematic Preoccupations in His Selected Fictional Works”, in *Remembering Chinua Achebe, op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>30</sup> John Keats, quoted by Djangoné-Bi et R. Okafor, *op. cit.*, p. 347.

bad side<sup>31</sup>” of Igbo culture has been revealed, since the author “cannot pretend that our past was one long technicolor idyll<sup>32</sup>.” The traditional marriage, the importance of wives and the children they give birth to, the veneration of deities, the belief in superstitions, the ostracism and the *Osu* caste system, are all cultural features meant to show the world that “African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless..., that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity<sup>33</sup>”. As a “historian of his society’s past and critic of its present state<sup>34</sup>”, and also as a “mentor, helping to guide [the contemporary community] towards its future<sup>35</sup>”, Achebe suggests keeping what is good in African and European ways, in order to advocate a dialogue of Africa’s and Europe’s cultures. Societal intermixing is a sine qua non for making it possible for “the present generation [...] to avoid the cultural dislocation that will eternally condemn them, and the future generations to perpetual underdevelopment<sup>36</sup>”.

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<sup>31</sup> Chinua Achebe, quoted by Nick Madika Tembo in *Remembering Chinua Achebe*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>33</sup> Chinua Achebe, “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation” in *African Writers on African Writing*, Ed. G. D. Killam, London, Heinemann, 1973, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Umelo Ojinmah, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

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