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Indigenous Parallels: Re-reading *Things Fall Apart* Through a Pre-Christian Zeliangrong Lens

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Abstract

This article reinterprets Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) through the cosmological, ritual, and social frameworks of the pre-Christian Zeliangrong peoples of Northeast India. Drawing on Kahmei (2023) and Kamei (1999, 2004, 2010), it examines structural parallels between Igbo and Zeliangrong worlds, including ancestor veneration, ritual authority, kinship governance, and responses to colonial disruption. While Achebe depicts Umuofia's collapse under missionary and colonial influence, a Zeliangrong comparative lens highlights adaptive continuity, ritual resilience, and ecological ethics. This cross-indigenous approach emphasizes relational morality, decentralized governance, and communal cohesion as core indigenous logics, revealing that the novel's tragedy is historically specific rather than universally representative. By juxtaposing Igbo cosmology with Zeliangrong practices, the study situates *Things Fall Apart* within a trans-indigenous discourse of moral, spiritual, and ecological order. It underscores the diversity of indigenous experiences, demonstrating that responses to colonial disruption encompassed both disintegration and continuity, thereby broadening the interpretive possibilities of Achebe's work.

Keywords: Achebe; Igbo; Zeliangrong; Indigenous cosmology; Colonial disruption

1. Introduction

Many people see Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) as a key work in African literature. It is often seen as a tragedy about the collapse of culture. The book shows how colonial rule and missionary work broke down Igbo cosmology, ritual authority, and social cohesion (Eze, 1997; Gikandi, 2010; Irele, 2001). Scholarly studies have usually focused on African ethnography, postcolonial theory, or gendered readings. These studies show how outside forces made indigenous structures less stable.

This study looks at the Zeliangrong peoples of Northeast India before Christianity, focusing on the Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei communities. The Zeliangrong, like the Igbo, had decentralized government, patrilineal kinship, ritual authority, and a cosmology centered on ancestors (Gangte, 2004; Panmei, 2019). Kamei's historical and anthropological work from 1999, 2004, and 2010 sheds light on the moral, ritual, and social structures of Zeliangrong society, giving us a new way to look at Achebe's description of Umuofia.

This method places the Igbo experience within a larger trans-indigenous conversation about cosmology, relational morality, and how people reacted to colonial disruption by focusing on structural similarities

instead of historical or genealogical links. It lets us read Things Fall Apart again, not just as a story from Africa, but as part of a global collection of indigenous ways of organizing society, religious authority, and moral cosmology under colonial rule.

Literature Review

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe situates Igbo life within a cosmological framework that integrates human action, spiritual forces, and communal morality. Key elements include the **chi** (personal spirit), **Ala** (earth goddess), and ancestors, whose presence enforces ethical behavior and social cohesion (Achebe, 1958). Misfortune, illness, and success are interpreted through this relational moral universe, where human agency coexists with spiritual accountability.

The pre-Christian Zeliangrong universe exhibits analogous structures. According to **Kahmei (2023)**, Rongmei cosmology comprises a Supreme Deity (**Tingkao Ragwang**), subordinate nature spirits, and ancestral entities who guide ethical conduct, mediate conflict, and oversee ecological responsibilities. Ritual specialists function as intermediaries, ensuring harmony between the human and spiritual realms. Ethnographic studies by **Horam (1975)** and historical analyses by **Kamei (1999, 2004, 2010)** further demonstrate that Zeliangrong rituals, festivals, and kinship obligations embed moral authority in ancestors, linking social, ethical, and ecological orders.

Reading Achebe through this lens highlights how *Things Fall Apart* portrays Igbo society as relational and morally grounded, revealing structural parallels with Zeliangrong cosmologies and indigenous epistemologies.

Theoretical Framework

Many people have seen Okonkwo's hypermasculinity, which comes from being aggressive, being afraid of failing, and not showing emotion, as both normal for his culture and bad for him personally (Irele, 2001; Gikandi, 2010). He is a man who values social dominance and physical strength over moral and relational responsibility. His fear of being perceived as weak, like his father Unoka, drives him to rule his household with a heavy hand, even to the point of drawing his machete against Ikemefuna.

A look at the Zeliangrong from a comparative point of view shows different ways that indigenous men can be masculine. Horam (1975) and Haokip (2018) both wrote ethnographic accounts that say that men's roles are based on self-control, ritual competence, and responsibility to the community. Boys who live in the khangchu dormitory system learn about rituals, ethics, and social skills that help them balance power with moral responsibility (Mills, 1937; Gangte, 2011). Kamei (1999, 2004, 2010) also stresses that Zeliangrong male identity is based on relationships and is measured by how much they help the clan and follow ancestral customs.

From this point of view, Okonkwo's actions show a failure of relational masculinity rather than just a cultural norm. Both Igbo and Zeliangrong cultures valued strength that was balanced by moral and community duties. This shows how Things Fall Apart shows the moral effects of imbalance in indigenous social structures.

Cosmology and Ancestor Mediation

Achebe portrays Igbo life as embedded in a **moral-cosmic order**, where human action is inseparable from spiritual and communal obligations (Achebe, 1958). Key elements include:

Chi: the personal spirit guiding individual destiny;

Ani (Ala): the earth goddess enforcing social and moral norms;

Ancestors: overseeing ethical conduct and communal life.

The pre-Christian Zeliangrong universe exhibits analogous structures. Ethnographic and historical accounts by **Horam (1975)**, **Gangte (2011)**, and **Kamei (1999, 2004, 2010)** describe a cosmology centered on a Supreme God (**Tingkao Ragwang**), subordinate nature spirits, and ancestors who regulate moral, social, and ecological order. Ritual specialists mediate between humans and spirits, ensuring that ethical conduct aligns with cosmic principles.

This comparative lens clarifies Achebe's emphasis on **relational morality**, highlighting structural parallels between Igbo and Zeliangrong cosmologies in integrating individual action, communal responsibility, and spiritual accountability.

Masculinity, Moral Balance, and Ritual Complementarity

Okonkwo exemplifies hypermasculinity, defined by aggression, fear of vulnerability, and emotional repression (Irele, 2001; Gikandi, 2010). His violent actions—killing Ikemefuna and beating his wife—show that Igbo moral and spiritual frameworks are out of balance. This shows how too much individualism can hurt community ethics.

In Zeliangrong society, male strength is also valued, but it is based on ritual competence, self-control, and community responsibility (Horam, 1975; Haokip, 2018). Boys who live in the khangchu dormitory system learn about ceremonies, moral discipline, and being responsible in social situations (Mills, 1937). When looked at in comparison, Okonkwo's failures show not only his own flaws but also a failure of relational masculinity, which is a key part of moral order in indigenous cultures.

Gender complementarity further emphasizes social equilibrium: in both Igbo and Zeliangrong societies, women hold significant ritual authority through fertility rites, ancestral veneration, and agricultural ceremonies (Gangte, 2011; Kamei, 2010). Colonial and missionary actions messed up these gendered moral and ritual systems, throwing off the balance of society and the universe as a whole.

Ritual Institutions: Egwugwu, Khangchu, and Authority

The egwugwu are masked ancestors in Igbo society who have both judicial and ritual authority. They represent the community's moral and spiritual order (Achebe, 1958; Isichei, 1978). They settle

disagreements, enforce traditional laws, and show that ancestral power is still strong, showing how governance and ritual are connected.

Zeliangrong societies have similar structures. Ethnographic and historical accounts talk about Tingkou-mei and male dormitories (khangchu) that keep the peace, make sure everyone does their age-grade duties, and plan community events (Shimray, 2001; Gangte, 2011). Kamei (1999, 2004) says that ritual authority is at the heart of Naga political organization. This means that governance is based on spiritual and moral principles rather than centralized state structures. Kahmei's (2023) most recent research reinforces the idea that ritual specialists play a role in maintaining social, moral, and ecological order.

The colonial and missionary suppression of these institutions messed up both political and spiritual order, just like the destruction of Umuofia's ritual systems in Things Fall Apart. So, a comparative analysis shows that Igbo and Zeliangrong societies base their authority on ritualized moral frameworks, which makes them especially open to outside interference.

Lineage, Marriage, and Village Governance

Both Igbo and Zeliangrong societies are patrilineal, practice bridewealth, and have decentralized village structures that stress the importance of lineage continuity and community governance. In Zeliangrong culture, bridewealth consists of livestock, beads, and ritual offerings that connect families and ancestors, strengthening social and spiritual duties (Panmei, 2019; Kahmei, 2023). Igbo bridewealth also strengthens ties between clans and ancestors, serving as a way for people to be held morally and socially accountable (Uchendu, 1965; Gangte, 2004).

Village autonomy encourages resilience by letting communities control their own political, ritual, and economic lives. But decentralized governance also made it easier for outside powers to take control. As Kamei (2010) points out, Naga villages before colonization took care of their own political and religious matters, which is similar to how Igbo governance worked. Colonial intrusion caused both societies to break down in a big way, showing how centralized authority can make lineage-based and ritualized social systems less stable.

Death, Exile, and Ritual Restoration

According to Igbo beliefs, accidental killing requires purification, whereas suicide is viewed as an abomination that disturbs ancestral continuity and communal harmony (Uchendu, 1965). The pre-Christian Zeliangrong also believe in ritual responses to death. For them, exile and purification bring the universe back into balance, while suicide disrupts both social and spiritual order (Shimray, 2001; Panmei, 2019). Kahmei (2023) says that among the Rongmei, ritual intervention after death keeps the balance between ancestors and the environment. Kamei (1999, 2004, 2010) writes about long processes for cleansing, reconciliation, and social reintegration, showing how important ritual is in moral and political life.

Okonkwo's death represents a profound personal and cosmic disruption, severing his ties to his ancestors

and destabilizing Umuofia's moral-spiritual equilibrium. When looked at through a Zeliangrong lens, this event shows a shared indigenous understanding of death, ritual accountability, and ancestral responsibility. It places Achebe's tragedy within a larger conversation about relational morality and cosmological order that was upset by colonial intrusion.

Colonial Disruption and Indigenous Resilience

Achebe shows that colonialism is bad for people's beliefs, their government, and their spirituality: missionaries undermine ancestral authority, colonial courts replace indigenous legal systems, and social cohesion falls apart (Achebe, 1958; Isichei, 1978).

Comparing Zeliangrong societies shows different paths to resilience. Kahmei (2023) shows that even though colonial powers tried to interfere, Zeliangrong communities kept their rituals going and changed the way they worshiped their ancestors to keep their social and spiritual unity. Kamei (1999, 2004) puts these disruptions in historical context by showing that pre-Christian Naga and Igbo societies had similar patterns of ritual vulnerability, decentralized governance, and moral-legal complexity, which affected how they reacted to outside pressure. Gangte (2011) and Haokip (2018) did more ethnographic work that shows how people adapted to colonial pressures by keeping dormitory systems and communal festivals going.

This way of looking at Things Fall Apart changes the story: the fall of Umuofia is not structurally necessary, but rather a result of a unique historical and cultural situation where indigenous social orders and colonial forces met.

Conclusion

Reading Things Fall Apart again with a pre-Christian Zeliangrong lens, using Kahmei (2023) and Kamei (1999, 2004, 2010) as guides, shows that Igbo and Zeliangrong societies have more in common in terms of structure and morals. Both cosmologies put ancestors and earth gods at the center of things, making moral responsibility a part of spiritual and community life. Relational masculinity and gender complementarity govern how people act in society, while ritual institutions like the Igbo egwugwu and Zeliangrong khangchu keep justice, unity, and moral responsibility in check. Bridewealth and kinship systems help keep lineages going and ancestral duties strong. The decentralized village structures in both cases show strength but also make them vulnerable to outside authority. A comparative analysis also shows that colonial disruption had different effects on different communities: Zeliangrong communities kept their rituals going and changed their government, while Umuofia's collapse was due to specific historical events. This cross-indigenous view changes Achebe's novel from just a story about the end of a culture to a study of moral, cosmological, and ecological order, focusing on the strength, adaptability, and relationships that make up indigenous societies.

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