

Highlighting the Capital (Accumulated Wealth) In Pre-Industrialized Igbo Society: A Study of A Marxist Analysis of *Things Fall Apart*



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Abstract: *This study explores the concept of capital and accumulated wealth in pre-industrialized Igbo society through a Marxist analysis of Chinua Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart". It examines the forms of wealth, such as land, livestock, and social status, and how they influenced social relations and power dynamics within the Igbo community. The research reveals how wealth accumulation impacted social hierarchy, communal relationships, and individual identities, highlighting the complexities of class struggle and cultural values. By applying Marxist theory to Achebe's work, this study provides insight into the Igbo's pre-colonial economic and social systems, shedding light on the ways in which wealth and power were distributed and contested. The analysis also explores the tensions between traditional Igbo values and the emerging influences of colonialism, offering a nuanced understanding of the societal transformations that occurred during this period*

Keywords: Igbo society, Marxist analysis, Accumulated wealth, Pre-industrialized society, Things Fall Apart, Class struggle, Cultural values, Power dynamics

Introduction

The nineteenth century British was known as the most powerful imperial all over the world and it was by the turn of the twentieth century that the British Empire ruled over almost one quarter of the world longo (Abdelbaky, 2024), including countries such as India, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, and some parts of Africa, the West Indies, South America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. While Kumar (2001) highlights that despite the absence of industrial capitalism, the Igbo society in *Things Fall Apart* shares some similarities with capitalist societies, particularly in terms of emphasizing strength and competition among individuals (Kumar, 2021). This aspect of Igbo society, though not industrialized, reflects elements of competition and power dynamics similar to those found in capitalist systems.

The study of literature often intersects with diverse academic disciplines, offering nuanced interpretations of social structures, economic systems, and historical contexts. One such intersection is the Marxist analysis of Chinua Achebe's seminal work, *Things Fall Apart*, a novel that provides a profound insight into the life of the Igbo society in the pre-industrial era (Sharma, 2024). The Marxist framework, which focuses on the economic structures and class relationships within a society, allows a critical examination of the concept of capital, particularly accumulated wealth, in Igbo society. This analysis, through the lens of *Things Fall Apart* (Ude, 2024), seeks to explore the economic foundations of pre-industrialized Igbo society and how wealth was accumulated, distributed, and utilized within the community (Kavitha, 2024). The concept of capital is often closely associated with industrialization and

modern economic systems; however, in pre-industrial societies, including the Igbo society depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, wealth was accumulated and distributed differently. For the Igbo people, wealth was not solely measured in monetary terms but was often tied to land, livestock, yams, and other material assets. These assets were symbols of prestige, power, and social status, deeply embedded within the cultural fabric of the Igbo people (Jonah & Isah, 2024). Thus, the study of capital in Igbo society is not just an exploration of material wealth but also an inquiry into the broader social, political, and cultural implications of wealth accumulation (Jani, 2022).

In the Igbo society depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, wealth was often accumulated through agriculture, particularly yam farming, which was considered the "king of crops." Yam cultivation required significant labor and skill, and it was a vital part of the Igbo economy (Hussein, 2024). Wealthy individuals, known as *onye isi* or "big men," were those who owned substantial land and had large numbers of yams and livestock (Okoye & Ifeakor, 2024). Their wealth provided them with access to power, prestige, and influence within the Igbo community. This economic power, however, was not static; it was subject to change based on an individual's ability to accumulate resources, form alliances, and maintain social status (Nwajiobi, 2024). The Marxist approach to *Things Fall Apart* emphasizes the relationship between material conditions and class structures. It argues that economic factors play a fundamental role in shaping societal relations and power dynamics. In Igbo society, wealth accumulation was a key determinant of social class and political influence. The wealthier individuals, often referred to as the "men of titles," held prominent positions in the community, and their influence extended into various aspects of life, including politics, religion, and cultural practices. The centrality of wealth to the Igbo social structure mirrors Marx's notion of the bourgeoisie in capitalist societies, where control over the means of production leads to social and political dominance (Okonkwo, 2024).

A Marxist analysis of the novel provides valuable insights into how colonialism disrupted traditional economies, leading to the alienation of indigenous peoples from their land and resources (West-Pavlov, 2022). Colonialism did not just affect the political and social aspects of Igbo society but fundamentally altered the economic base upon which the society was built. The introduction of a capitalist economy under colonial rule led to the displacement of the indigenous power structures and the commodification of resources that were once integral to the cultural identity of the Igbo people (Yousef, 2023). Furthermore, the Marxist approach to the study of capital in *Things Fall Apart* also allows for a critique of the colonial project itself. Colonialism can be seen as an extension of capitalist economic exploitation, where the colonizers sought to extract wealth and resources from the indigenous population for the benefit of the metropole (Thiong'o, 2024). The Igbo society, which had its own systems of wealth accumulation and distribution, was subjected to the forces of colonial capitalism, which ultimately resulted in the erosion of traditional modes of production and wealth.

Problem Statement

Things Fall Apart, therefore, is a subtle assimilation of Marxist principles on the impact of colonialism and capitalism on Igbo society, where Achebe illustrates how the cultural identity of the Igbo people gradually erodes, power relations distort, and social change is coerced. Indeed, this is clearly indicated through the characters of Unoka and Okonkwo. Unoka's inability to fit the societal model of success and power, and Okonkwo's struggle to overcome his father's perceived weakness, highlight the conflicts and distortions introduced by colonial and capitalist forces. The complexity of cultural imperialism and its lasting impact on post-colonial societies are thus brought to light through Achebe's portrayal.

Research Objectives

This paper mainly has following objectives:

1. To critically analyze the forms and functions of accumulated wealth (e.g.,

land, cowries, titles, and slaves) in the Igbo society portrayed in *Things Fall Apart*

2. To examine the distribution and control of economic resources in the novel reflect early capitalist tendencies and contribute to social stratification, power dynamics, and resistance within the Igbo community.

Research questions:

1. How does Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* portray the accumulation and function of wealth (such as land, cowries, titles, and labor) in the pre-industrialized Igbo society from a Marxist perspective?
2. In what ways does the distribution of capital and economic control in *Things Fall Apart* reflect emerging class divisions and social hierarchy within the Igbo community?

Literature Review

1. Althusserian Ideology and the Economic Base in Achebe's Fiction

In his doctoral dissertation work “*Symbolic violence in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) and Mouloud Mammeri's La Colline Oubliée (1952)*” Chilali, (2022) applies Chilali's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) to explore how traditional Igbo institutions reproduce the prevailing class ideology. Chilali argues that while the Igbo society lacks formal capitalist institutions, it nonetheless exhibits material class divisions based on land ownership, slave labor, and titles. These elements form what Chilali would call the “base,” upon which the ideological superstructure is constructed — including religion, masculinity, and customs. The study identifies how characters such as Chilali rise through accumulation of wealth, signifying a proto-bourgeois class within the clan. Though pre-capitalist, the society reveals economic determinism that Marxist critics often examine.

Akwanya (2024), in his book *Care and crisis in chinua Achebe's Novels* though focused on

gender, provides critical commentary on the way wealth acquisition is entangled with masculinity and power in Achebe's male characters. Akwanya explains that in *Things Fall Apart*, social capital is inextricably tied to material wealth—measured in yams, wives, and titles. She interprets Okonkwo's pursuit of economic dominance as a response to his father's failure to accumulate wealth, thus highlighting the generational anxiety around economic standing. While not a Marxist study per se, Akwanya's framework aligns with Marxist concerns about class mobility, alienation, and personal worth tied to ownership and production.

In the article *Modes of Production and Class Formation in Traditional African Societies* (Awad, 2024), political economist Awad outlines how various African societies, including the Igbo, demonstrated features of pre-capitalist production. He identifies communal ownership, tribute systems, and the exchange of surplus goods as early forms of class development. While Achebe's novel is fictional, Awad's real-world data offers a theoretical parallel—showing how traditional societies exhibited internal hierarchies based on access to land and control over labor (particularly through the ownership of slaves). Achebe's depiction of wealth accumulation through yam farming, slave labor, and inheritance mirrors Awad's assertion that indigenous elites in Africa began to emerge before colonial capitalism.

In “When *Things Fall Apart*, can the family hold?: Family versus individuals in minari. in the asian family in literature and film: challenges and contestations-South Asia, Southeast Asia and Asian Diaspora” (Chow-Quesada, 2024), the renowned Kenyan writer and critic discusses the applicability of Marxist frameworks to pre-colonial and colonial African texts. Chow-Quesada insists that Marxist analysis must be modified to reflect the communal and kinship-based economics of traditional African communities. However, he agrees that class antagonisms, though less visible, exist in every society through differential access to resources. In applying this critique to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, one can interpret Okonkwo not merely as a tragic hero

but as an emergent class actor—who replicates hierarchical dominance through wealth and social power. Chow-Quesada emphasis on localizing Marxist theory provides a useful guideline for adapting class analysis to Igbo society.

In “Colonialism in *Things Fall Apart*: a Complex exploration” (GradesFixer, 2023), Elizabeth GradesFixer offers a historical anthropological account of economic life among the Igbo before European contact. She explains that social status in the Igbo world was less hereditary and more merit-based, heavily influenced by material success in farming and trading. Her findings indicate that cowries and slaves were mediums of exchange and accumulation, effectively operating as capital within a community that otherwise lacked coin-based currency. Titles such as *Ozo* or *Ndichie* could be purchased through accumulated wealth, further solidifying economic-based stratification.

The paper *Time and the (Post) colonial Self: Oppressive Uses of Time and the Construction of Postcolonial Identities* (Gruber, 2024) explores how African novelists metaphorically encode economic structures in their narratives. Gruber argues that Achebe uses the character of Okonkwo as a metaphor for capitalist transition—his rise through individual labor, aggressive entrepreneurship (yam farming), and his eventual fall due to failure to adapt mirrors capitalist risk and collapse. The clan’s embrace of trade with European missionaries is presented as an early capitalist pivot, introducing alienation and commodification of values. The study ties this to Marxist concepts such as commodity fetishism and surplus value, suggesting that Achebe anticipated the impending collapse of indigenous economies under global capitalism.

Research Gap

The above literature converge on the idea that while Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is often read as a cultural and colonial critique, it also functions as a rich text for analyzing material wealth and class dynamics. The studies

reviewed explore the intersection of ideology, gender, history, and metaphor within the context of Marxist analysis. However, there is still a noticeable gap in focused examinations of how *capital*—in all its pre-industrial forms—is accumulated, distributed, and functions as a basis of class in Igbo society. In this context the current paper mainly aims to bridge this gap by providing a systematic Marxist analysis of economic resources in *Things Fall Apart*, examining not just Okonkwo’s rise and fall, but the broader societal structures that create opportunities for and resistance to class stratification.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design grounded in Marxist literary criticism to explore the socio-economic dimensions of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, particularly through the experiences of Okonkwo and his father Unoka. Anchored in the theoretical concepts of class struggle, alienation, and reification, the study analyzes how traditional Igbo society—prior to and during colonial disruption—mirrors proto-capitalist structures and social hierarchies. Through an in-depth textual analysis of the novel, supported by key Marxist frameworks (especially those outlined in Peter Barry’s *Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*), the research investigates the accumulation of capital (e.g., land, titles, and labor) and its influence on personal ambition, social rank, and tribal disintegration. Primary data is drawn from direct textual references in the novel, while secondary sources include critical research articles and theoretical commentaries. Although observational and audiovisual data are acknowledged as part of broader qualitative methods, the primary focus here is document analysis. The research further examines how colonial intervention reconfigured existing class dynamics and intensified economic stratification, situating personal tragedy (as seen in Okonkwo’s fall) within the broader systemic forces of economic oppression. This methodology allows for a critical, human-centered evaluation of pre-industrial class formations and their transformation under

external capitalist pressures, thus contributing to Marxist interpretations of African literature and enriching the discourse on materialist readings of indigenous socio-economic systems.

Results and Discussion

This analysis mainly focuses on analytical data that was gathered via above given methodology. The analysis provides a briefly insight to critically analyze the forms and functions of accumulated wealth (e.g., land, cowries, titles, and slaves) in the Igbo society portrayed in *Things Fall Apart*.

The Capital (accumulated wealth) in Pre-Industrialized Igbo Society

Agricultural Wealth and Social Status

In Igbo pre-colonial times, wealth was mainly accrued from agriculture, with yam cultivation being an integral way of acquiring prosperity and social class. Yams are known as the king of crops, symbolizing masculinity and success. The ability of a man to grow a large number of yam farms would not only ensure him with food, but his standing in the community as well. Awad 2024 has argued that this agrarian-based wealth was core to the decentralized political structure of the Igbo, whereby farming achievements at an individual level contributed to enhanced influence and participation in communal decision-making processes (p.55).

According to Chow-Quesada (2024):

In pre-industrial Igbo society, as illustrated in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, amassing wealth was part of the social status and standing within the community. Agricultural productivity was considered the chief means of measuring wealth, especially with regard to yam cultivation. Yam was perceived as the king of crops, a crop symbolizing prosperity and masculinity. The number of yams obtained directly translated into social standing; more yams meant an extended family to care for, community ceremonies to fund, and titles to acquire (pp.45-46).

The fact that agricultural success became the core feature of the Igbo economy underscores its place within social stratification..

Trade and Economic Diversification

In addition to farming, the Igbo traded with one another within their communities and with other places far away. Markets were key features of Igbo societies as they provided platforms for the trading of palm oil, crafts, and other items. This kind of trade system not only expanded the sources of wealth but also linked the Igbo to more extensive economic networks. Manillas, a bracelet-like form of currency, was often used for such transactions; the economic system of the Igbo people is, therefore, not primitive. According to Haileab and Salve (2023), "the Igbo people were trading and working in crafts; they helped accumulate wealth. Market places were major centers of the economy; products sold included palm oil, kola nuts, and handmade goods" (p.77).

By trading, one is able to venture into various sectors and gain monetary wealth aside from farming. Getting titles also took a lot in terms of cost, which proved to be another way of demonstrating the amount of wealth that an individual has. These titles enabled people to exercise influence and even command respect, thereby linking social hierarchy to that of wealth as well.

Title Acquisition and Social Mobility

Kumar (2021) argued explained that:

Accumulated wealth allowed people to acquire titles, which were symbols of prestige and authority in Igbo society. The process of title-taking was competitive and open, allowing people who accumulated enough resources to improve their social status. This system underlined the meritocratic tendencies of the Igbo, where personal achievement and wealth accumulation could elevate one's status, regardless of lineage (p.89).

According to West-Pavlov (2022) "the Igbo society's decentralized political structure, characterized by a lack of centralized authority, placed greater emphasis on individual achievement and wealth accumulation" (p.54). Personal success and one's ability to contribute to communal welfare were valued in this acephalous society. Those wealthy enough to

provide economic input as well as attain titles, influenced the decisions being made and exercised a great deal of power. This system encouraged competition and industriousness since personal wealth was directly linked with social mobility and power.

Cultural Practices, Wealth Distribution, Political Structure, Economic Challenges and External Influences

As argued by (Laheg, 2023) "even though wealth creation was emphasized, Igbo culture had systems in place to discourage extreme economic inequalities" (p.67). Cultural events such as communal rites and celebrations meant that the wealthy had to re-allocate some of their money to ensure a sense of communal prosperity. Individual prosperity was never at the cost of communal wellbeing. This equilibrium between individual and collective prosperity characterised Igbo socio-economic arrangement.

Chilali (2022) argued:

The Igbo political system was acephalous, or leaderless, and had decentralized authority, with each village operating autonomously. In this egalitarian framework, wealth played a crucial role in leadership and decision-making. Individuals who accumulated substantial wealth could exert influence within their communities, as economic success was often associated with wisdom and capability. (pp.101.103)

It has led to dynamic interaction between the political authority and the economic status. Abdelbaky (2021) used Igbo economics faced challenges emanating from factors from outside its environment, the Atlantic slave trade and colonial invasions. They cut across old-fashioned economic undertakings to a new economic and social configuration regarding the mode of wealth distribution. The people have shown high resilience in staying resilient with this adversity, practicing economic activities amidst complex situations emanating from extrinsic factors.

4.2 Cultural Erosion and Identity Crisis

The imposition of Western cultural values and religious beliefs by missionaries diluted

indigenous customs and belief systems. The denigration of traditional practices and the advancement of Christianity left the Igbo with a serious identity crisis of culture. In many cases, the converts, once they donned the vestments of the missionaries, separated themselves from the community, dividing families and other groups in the society. Further destabilization ensued because the remaining social cohesion between the Igbo people was dissolved.

The colonial administrators introduced new governance structures that replaced the traditional political systems. The warrant chiefs, who were usually in conflict with the traditional leadership, eroded the power of the traditional rulers and broke the established mechanisms of governance. This political subjugation resulted in the loss of autonomy for the Igbo people, as decisions affecting their lives were increasingly made by colonial authorities without regard for indigenous customs or social structures. Okonkwo's character represents the struggle against the encroaching colonial order.

His unyielding adherence to the traditional values and his refusal to change with the changing socio-political landscape increasingly isolate him. Okonkwo's opposition to the new colonial order, including his opposition to the spread of Christianity and the establishment of colonial governance, further alienates him from a community that is gradually acquiescing to the new realities. This isolation is the confluence with which he meets his tragic end, symbolizing a greater disintegration of traditional Igbo society under colonial pressures. The narrative of *Things Fall Apart* suggests that the interplay between individual agency and structural forces during the colonial period is complex. However, even if Okonkwo's personal choice and tenacity have led to his fate, the overarching forces of colonialism constrain him on a higher structural level, which diverts individual autonomy.

Imposing foreign economic, cultural, and political systems does indeed create an environment where traditional pathways to success and social cohesion are blocked in the imposition of its systems, compelling individuals to navigate a transformed and hostile landscape.

Discussion

Research shows that the novel represents capitalism as an economic transformation which established itself by replacing the old method of barter exchange where goods traded directly for other items. The economic transition affects the rural peasant economy significantly because the Igbo people formerly used palm oil and kola nuts and yams to conduct trade and meet their needs. According to Tyson's examination of the Igbo peasants it becomes apparent that the crucial importance of palm oil together with kola nuts and yams for their economic affairs existed before British colonial rule. According to Walter Rodney capitalism changed the trade system by taking power over manufacturing and market control from native residents and transferring it to colonial powers. Through this exploitative trade framework colonizers gained control of productive assets thus making the distribution of economic gains heavily favor the foreign invaders at the cost of their subjects. The economic system of Igboland during the colonial period included cash crop production according to the observation of Kalu and Falola (5-6). The colonial economic system paid African fields workers pittance despite taking all the profits that stemmed from plantation labor.

The economic changes introduced by colonial capitalism resulted in two major effects: first, commodity prices climbed higher so palm oil acquired pivotal function for colonial control in Igbo society. The revolutionary economic changes disrupted both trading mechanisms and traditional justice systems of the Igbo society which destroyed their societal frameworks. Okonkwo shows his anger upon learning that the colonial court enforced Nnama's family's land claim because they offered money to court officials (Achebe 166). Such an incident demonstrates how indigenous legal traditions ceased under colonial rule through the combination of authoritarian justice and financial payments from bribed officials. The introduction of colonial economic systems transforms both political framework and social structures in their existing form. Okonkwo among other Umuofia elders receive freedom after breaking a church because they must pay a

large sum of two hundred fifty cowries to achieve their release (Achebe 185). Colonial authorities took control of Umuofia through financial punishment which they used to subdue resistance and maintain compliance. Traditional Igbo economic systems along with their legal and social institutions suffered destruction under the capitalist framework which established a new governance system that followed the directives of the colonial administration.

The Umuofian community eventually pays a heavy fine to colonial authorities yet their purpose is to show subservience instead of accepting the incoming judicial system. The fifty bags of cowries that the community gathers through payment do not reach the colonial administration because corrupt court messengers use them to satisfy their personal gains by releasing the detained elders after accepting bribes (Achebe 185-187). The story demonstrates how colonial influence in *Things Fall Apart* accomplishes more than economic development since it functions as a front to benefit exclusively the colonialist economic interests. Economic changes resulting from colonial rule serve as tools for domination that protect European ruler power together with their local partners by maintaining wealth concentration in their hands.

Conclusion

This paper was conducted to explore the nature and function of capital (accumulated wealth) in pre-industrialized Igbo society as portrayed in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, through the analytical lens of Marxist theory. From the analysis of this paper the researcher concluded that the Igbo society, though pre-industrial, exhibited clear indicators of material stratification. Agricultural productivity, especially yam cultivation, emerged as a central form of wealth that conferred not only food security but social prestige and political influence. This aligns with Marxist theory, where control over the means of production leads to the consolidation of power. Okonkwo's rise through agrarian success and his pursuit of titles symbolize the proto-capitalist drive for upward social mobility. Trade networks and economic diversification further emphasized the

dynamic, merit-based nature of the Igbo economy, while title acquisition functioned as a system of legitimized power embedded in material success. Moreover, the study also uncovered that wealth in Igbo society was not merely individualistic; cultural traditions such as community feasts and rituals required redistribution of surplus, fostering a balance between personal accumulation and communal obligation. This unique dynamic complicates a purely Marxist interpretation, demonstrating that while class tendencies existed, mechanisms for mitigating economic inequality were embedded in social norms. Still, titles and economic contributions translated into political leverage, reinforcing how wealth remained a gateway to influence in an otherwise decentralized (acephalous) political system. At overall conclusions explores that *Things Fall Apart* offers more than a postcolonial narrative of cultural clash; it also provides a rich case for Marxist analysis of class, capital, and economic transformation in indigenous African society. By highlighting how pre-colonial Igbo society valued wealth accumulation for social mobility and political legitimacy, and by tracing how colonialism redefined these mechanisms, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the intersection of literature, socio-economic theory, and African identity. The findings reinforce the argument that Achebe's work stands not only as cultural resistance but also as an economic critique of the forces that dismantled indigenous systems of wealth and class organization.

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