



Ritual, Religion, and Cultural Essentialism in Chinua Achebe's *The Sacrificial Egg*: Reaffirming African Spiritual Identity in a Postcolonial World

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an essentialist and religious reading of Chinua Achebe's short story *The Sacrificial Egg*, arguing that the narrative affirms continuity in indigenous African spirituality despite colonial presence. The study examines how the protagonists, Julius Obi and Ma, embody spiritual values inherited from traditional Igbo religion through their adherence to ritual norms, fear of ancestral deities, and resistance to religious erosion. Using textual analysis, the paper uncovers religious symbols (such as the sacrificial egg and Kitikpa) that reflect moral frameworks and divine justice within Igbo cosmology. The result reveals that their actions are not culturally fragmented but religiously grounded. This perspective challenges common postcolonial interpretations that center on hybridity and loss. The religious dimensions of the story illustrate why spiritual identity remains vital in preserving cultural integrity in pluralistic societies. Ultimately, the study underscores the role of indigenous religion in maintaining cultural resilience and shaping moral consciousness across generations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religion in societies is not a separate or private aspect of life (Sabtana *et al.*, 2025; Azizah *et al.*, 2022; Anggraeni & Maryanti, 2021), it is a collective and foundational part of social structure, cultural identity, and everyday decision-making. African traditional religion is practiced not only in formal rituals but also in naming customs, taboos, family roles, illness interpretations, and communal decisions (Adeoye, 2023). African life is “religious by nature,” with every action rooted in a spiritual worldview. In literature, this relationship between belief and behavior is often captured through symbolic narratives that reflect and preserve indigenous values. According to literature (McDonough, 2008), culture combines traditional norms with symbolic forms of communication, functioning as a shared system through which people construct identity and meaning. Chinua Achebe's short story *The Sacrificial Egg* in *Colonial and Postcolonial Fiction in English* embodies this connection, illustrating how African cosmology and spiritual belief remain active forces in a society undergoing colonial and cultural change. Through symbols such as the sacrificial egg, the smallpox deity Kitikpa, and the observance of traditional market days, the story presents religion and tradition as enduring sources of identity and moral order.

Despite this, earlier scholarship has often interpreted Achebe's story through the lens of postcolonial cultural conflict. Many researchers argue that the main character, Julius Obi, experiences inner turmoil as a result of tensions between Western modernization and African tradition. Julius and Ma are psychologically entrapped between two opposing systems (Maruti & Vijay, 2014). Julius is emotionally torn between modern rationalism and indigenous spirituality. These interpretations frame the story primarily as a narrative of hybridity, identity confusion, and cultural fragmentation. While these views have contributed important insights, they often overlook how deeply the characters remain anchored in their religious worldview. As a result, spiritual symbols and rituals are sometimes dismissed as outdated superstition, rather than understood as legitimate epistemologies that shape ethical behavior and collective life.

This paper proposes a different reading. Rather than interpreting *The Sacrificial Egg* as a tale of cultural confusion, it argues that the characters operate within a coherent and continuous worldview grounded in religious and cultural essentialism. Their choices reflect not dislocation, but spiritual alignment with Igbo cosmology, where rituals, ancestral spirits, and divine justice are morally binding. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that Achebe's story affirms spiritual resilience in the face of external pressure, emphasizing the survival of religious traditions as sources of cultural integrity. The novelty of this paper lies in its use of essentialist theory to reposition indigenous religion as a dynamic and authoritative force in postcolonial literature. While previous studies emphasized conflict and crisis (Maruti & Vijay, 2014), this study foregrounds the enduring role of belief, ritual, and spiritual consciousness in sustaining identity and moral coherence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Essentialism refers to the idea that individuals or social groups possess core, unchanging attributes that define their identity across time and space. In cultural theory, cultural essentialism is the belief that cultural groups are guided by inherent characteristics (such as values, beliefs, language, or rituals) that are passed down through generations. These characteristics are not seen as temporary or superficial, but as central to the group's worldview and behavior. As previous studies (Chao & Kung, 2015) explain, essentialism is the lay belief that categories like ethnicity, race, or religion reflect internal, immutable qualities

that influence how group members think and act. This contrasts with constructivist views, which treat identity as fluid and historically contingent.

Religious essentialism is a branch of this theory that sees religious belief as a stable, organizing force in people's lives. In African societies, religion does not merely function as a set of formal doctrines; it shapes daily behavior, ethical norms, and even emotional responses to life events. John Mbiti in 1969 in his book "African Religions and Philosophy", a key figure in African religious studies, emphasized that traditional African religion is not static folklore but a living, guiding force embedded in every domain of life. For example, illness may be understood as punishment from spiritual beings, and rituals such as sacrifice are seen as necessary acts to maintain harmony with the unseen world. These perspectives are especially relevant in multicultural and plural societies, where cultural and religious boundaries interact. even within multicultural states, cultural groups maintain strong connections to their traditional identities through essential traits (Berry, 1979). Most nation-states are culturally heterogeneous and that ethnic groups often resist assimilation by preserving their internal cultural logics. This insight applies directly to *The Sacrificial Egg*, where the society of Umuru includes both forest people (Igbo) and river people (Olu), yet cultural distinctions remain resilient. Thus, the story provides a literary example of Berry's claim that cultural pluralism does not necessarily lead to cultural dilution. Despite this, many literary scholars continue to interpret works like Achebe's from a postcolonial perspective that prioritizes cultural hybridity and identity conflict. While such approaches illuminate the pressures faced by colonized societies, they risk ignoring the depth and persistence of traditional belief systems. By applying essentialist theory (particularly religious essentialism) this study seeks to restore attention to the continuity and agency of indigenous belief, rather than framing characters like Julius and Ma as passive recipients of cultural fragmentation. Essentialism offers a powerful framework for understanding how spiritual logic continues to guide personal decisions and community dynamics, especially in postcolonial African literature.

3. METHODS

The analysis was grounded in the theoretical framework of cultural and religious essentialism, which posited that the characters' actions and beliefs were informed by enduring traditional religious values rather than by cultural hybridity or confusion. Specific attention was paid to indigenous Igbo religious practices such as the worship of Kitikpa (the deity of smallpox), sacrificial rituals, naming conventions, and culturally sanctioned marriage customs. Primary data was extracted from Achebe's text through close reading, focusing on descriptive passages and dialogue that evoked spiritual themes. Secondary data was drawn from scholarly literature on African traditional religions, essentialist theory, and critical interpretations of Achebe's work. These sources were used to contextualize the textual evidence within broader discussions of cultural identity, moral order, and religious resilience in postcolonial African literature.

No empirical fieldwork or interviews were conducted, as the study remained within the interpretive tradition of literary scholarship. Nevertheless, the text was treated as a cultural artifact that reflected theological consciousness and encoded moral systems. The method enabled the researcher to uncover why characters like Julius and Ma adhered to spiritual customs, and how such practices functioned as forms of resistance to cultural erasure. The methodology facilitated a reinterpretation of *The Sacrificial Egg* as a spiritual rather than hybrid narrative, emphasizing the persistence of indigenous religious frameworks amid

modern disruptions. Through this lens, the story was shown to affirm the moral and theological foundations of Igbo identity.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Essentialist Religious Identity in *The Sacrificial Egg*

This section explores how Chinua Achebe's *The Sacrificial Egg* illustrates the persistence of religious identity in the lives of its characters, particularly through the lens of cultural and religious essentialism. Drawing on a close reading of the text, the analysis focuses on symbolic elements and narrative details that reveal a continuing adherence to Igbo religious cosmology. Rather than portraying cultural confusion or hybridity, the story presents characters whose beliefs and actions are rooted in an internally coherent worldview. Religious motifs such as the sacrificial egg, the deity Kitikpa, ancestral fear, and ritual practice reveal that African traditional religion continues to serve as a source of explanation, moral guidance, and identity coherence for the characters.

4.2. The Ritual Landscape of Umuru: Culture, Commerce, and Cosmology

Achebe situates the story in the riverside town of Umuru, a liminal space where tradition and colonial modernity coexist. Although the setting includes signs of modernization (such as Julius's position as a clerk in a European trading company) the deeper structure of society remains embedded in traditional religious and cultural codes. This is particularly evident in the portrayal of the market. The market is not simply a place of commerce but a spiritually charged environment governed by ancestral rhythms. Despite administrative changes brought about by colonial governance, the people of Umuru still structure the market's activity around the traditional Igbo calendar.

"The market, though still called Nkwo, had long ceased to be held only on Nkwo day. It was now a daily market. But despite this change, it was still busiest on its original Nkwo day."

This passage reveals that while surface structures may have adapted to new systems, the underlying cultural rhythm persists. From an essentialist standpoint, this reflects the community's commitment to ancestral timekeeping and spatial orientation—markers of religious identity. The continued reverence for the market's spiritual significance shows that traditional cosmology has not been erased, but subtly integrated into daily practice. The naming of the market day (Nkwo) signals the society's retention of indigenous temporal structure. These are not arbitrary customs; they are spiritual markers tied to religious belief and ancestral memory.

4.3. Kitikpa: Disease, Deity, and Divine Punishment

One of the most significant religious symbols in the story is the deity Kitikpa, associated with smallpox. Kitikpa is not merely a metaphor for disease but is understood as a divine agent of punishment. When smallpox strikes, it is not explained in biomedical terms, but as the arrival of a fearsome spirit. This belief is not just held by elders, but also feared by Julius, the Western-educated clerk. Though he has been exposed to colonial ideology and rational schooling, Julius does not dismiss Kitikpa's presence. Instead, he is warned by Ma to stay indoors, and he obeys, suggesting a lingering respect (even fear) for spiritual explanations.

"You must keep to your rooms. You never know whom you might meet on the streets. That family has got it. He has decorated one of them already and the rest were moved away today in a big government lorry."

In this passage, the reference to "decorated" evokes a spiritual and ritualized framing of death and disease. Kitikpa is not just a health threat but a force that demands spiritual protection. From a religious essentialist perspective, this indicates that even in the face of colonial medical systems, indigenous religious beliefs retain explanatory power. The characters do not abandon their traditional understanding of misfortune, they interpret it through inherited religious frameworks that provide meaning and a sense of control. This also challenges the claim by previous studies (Afejuku & Mamudu, 2012) that *The Sacrificial Egg* mocks native misunderstanding of disease. Rather, the story portrays belief in Kitikpa not as ignorance, but as a theologically coherent system rooted in collective memory. Within African traditional religion, deities like Kitikpa are agents of justice who enforce moral and social codes. When communities break taboos or fail to honor ancestors, they may be punished through visible afflictions. Thus, Kitikpa's arrival is not random; it is interpreted as a consequence of spiritual imbalance.

4.4. The Egg at the Crossroads: Symbol of Sacrifice and Sacred Space

Perhaps the most important image in the story is the sacrificial egg itself. Julius steps on it accidentally while walking near the riverbank. Achebe describes this moment carefully:

"Someone oppressed by misfortune had brought the offering to the crossroads in the dusk... Julius wiped the sole of his foot on the sandy path and went on, carrying another vague worry in his mind."

This sacrificial egg is a clear sign of ritual practice, rooted in Igbo religion. The egg is offered as a spiritual plea, a ritual effort to ward off misfortune or appease spirits at a spiritually charged location: the crossroads. In Igbo cosmology, crossroads are symbolic meeting points between the physical and spiritual world. They represent decision-making, destiny, and contact with otherworldly forces. By stepping on the egg, Julius unintentionally violates a sacred act, and though he tries to dismiss it, he is disturbed. His worry is not rooted in guilt from a legal or rational standpoint, but in fear of spiritual repercussion. This reaction indicates that Julius's worldview is still shaped by essentialist religious logic. He does not mock the offering or rationalize it away, he is unsettled, because deep within, he acknowledges its power. This moment functions as a turning point. From a postcolonial or hybrid lens, Julius might be read as someone caught between two systems. But from a religious essentialist view, this moment is one of spiritual recognition. The act of wiping his foot is a half-measure, not of cleansing physical dirt, but perhaps of trying to undo a spiritual offense. The fact that this moment is followed by news of death confirms to Julius that something has gone wrong, and the gods have responded.

4.5. Marriage and Moral Boundaries: Faithfulness to Cultural Order

The relationship between Julius and Ma's daughter, Janet, is not framed in romantic or Western liberal terms. Instead, it is bound by moral codes rooted in traditional culture. Julius's concern over not seeing Janet for a week is not only a matter of emotion, but of ritual propriety. In many African traditions, including Igbo, courtship and marriage involve cultural expectations, ancestral approval, and spiritual readiness.

"Julius was sad and worried because it was almost a week since he had seen Janet, the girl he was going to marry."

His worry is connected not just to absence, but to timing, omen, and spiritual atmosphere—especially in a period when Kitikpa is present. In this sense, the marriage is not

a private affair but part of cultural and religious continuity. It ties individuals not only to each other, but to the extended family, ancestors, and the larger moral order of the community.

4.6. Sacred Space and Invisible Structures: The Coexistence of Modern and Ancestral Worlds

Although Achebe's setting includes markers of colonial infrastructure and modern life (offices, roadways, government trucks) these spaces are not spiritually neutral. Instead, they are layered with invisible meaning derived from traditional religious knowledge. From a superficial perspective, Julius works in a European-style office, reflecting the growing influence of Western modernity. However, Achebe's depiction of the office space subtly undermines its authority by describing it as passive, almost lifeless:

"The fat Chief Clerk was snoring at his table, and the gatekeeper was sleeping at his post."

This description is not incidental. It symbolizes the emptiness of colonial bureaucracy, which, despite its external control, lacks the spiritual vitality that defines indigenous structures. Julius does not feel a sense of ethical urgency in this workplace; he sits silently at his desk, disconnected from its purpose. The authority that animates his inner world is not colonial administration, but ancestral religion. The marketplace, on the other hand, is alive. Though it has been renamed and reorganized under colonial influence, it remains the true center of communal and spiritual activity. It is there that sacrifices are made, warnings are shared, and the spiritual atmosphere is negotiated. From an essentialist perspective, the market is not merely economic. It is sacred space, shaped by ritual rhythm and the presence of the divine. Culture consists not only of customs, but of symbolic structures that allow meaning to be communicated (McDonough, 2008). In *The Sacrificial Egg*, this meaning flows through the market, not through the office.

4.7. The Role of Ma: Female Guardians of Religious Memory

A central figure in the transmission of religious belief is Ma, the mother of Janet. Although secondary in terms of narrative focus, Ma plays a critical role in reinforcing spiritual understanding and cultural values. She acts as a guardian of ancestral wisdom, particularly in her warning to Julius about Kitikpa:

"You must keep to your rooms. You never know whom you might meet on the streets."

Ma's tone is not casual; it reflects the seriousness with which older generations interpret public danger. Her authority is spiritual, not institutional. She does not cite medical advice or legal instructions, but a religious reading of illness: the presence of Kitikpa as a force that must be respected. In traditional African societies, elder women often serve as cultural custodians, passing on moral instruction through spoken warnings, ritual practices, and symbolic interpretation. In this story, Ma occupies that role fully. Her invocation of supernatural forces is not framed as irrational; rather, it reflects an epistemology that values spiritual causality over secular explanation. Julius's response is also telling: he does not dismiss her, nor does he argue. He internalizes her words, later demonstrating anxiety and fear. From an essentialist perspective, this exchange shows that belief is inherited and maintained through interpersonal relationships, particularly across generations. Furthermore, Ma's language about unseen presences in the market (*"nor all who come to the great market were real people"*) points to a worldview where the seen and unseen coexist, and where perception itself is spiritualized. Her caution about the tail of the eye and things that vanish before being fully seen aligns with Igbo metaphysics, in which the spiritual realm is ever-present but only partially visible. This contrasts sharply with colonial logic, which seeks to classify, explain, and regulate through scientific and bureaucratic systems. Ma's voice represents embodied wisdom that resists erasure—not through open conflict, but through steady presence and

insistence on belief. In religious essentialist terms, she acts as a cultural transmitter, ensuring that continuity is maintained not only through ritual, but through speech, tone, and daily action.

4.8. Emotional Response as Cultural Knowledge

Achebe also uses Julius's emotional reactions to convey the depth of cultural continuity. Although educated and professionally employed, Julius is emotionally vulnerable when confronted with sacred violations. After stepping on the sacrificial egg, he is filled with vague unease:

"He wiped the sole of his foot on the sandy path and went on, carrying another vague worry in his mind." This sentence is rich in psychological and symbolic meaning. Julius does not rationalize what happened; instead, he is disturbed in a way that cannot be fully explained through logic. The worry he carries is not personal guilt, but spiritual anxiety—a reaction embedded in years of cultural formation. Later, when he receives news of the child's death, his internal world collapses into fear:

"Panic sweat broke all over him and he was nearly impelled to get up and run."

This is not the reaction of someone processing random tragedy. It is the reaction of someone who believes, deeply and instinctively, that he has violated a spiritual boundary and is now facing consequence. This emotional response validates the spiritual framework rather than undermining it. The power of belief here is not shown through sermons or speeches, but through involuntary, bodily reaction. In essentialist terms, belief is embodied. This embodiment is key to understanding why religion remains resilient even in contexts of cultural collision. While ideology can shift and political power can change, embodied responses (like fear, respect, shame, and awe) remain anchored in early formation and shared symbols. Achebe's portrayal of Julius's fear is therefore not just psychological but theological. It is a reaction to the spiritual order being disrupted, and it confirms that even a "modern" man is still a carrier of religious memory.

4.9. Religious Epistemology vs. Colonial Rationalism

Throughout the story, Achebe sets up subtle contrasts between indigenous epistemology and colonial systems of thought. On the surface, Julius is a product of colonial education, he has passed Standard Six, works in an office, and uses Western tools (a typewriter). Yet these tools do not define his worldview. When faced with crisis, he does not retreat to rationalism. He reverts, almost involuntarily, to inherited beliefs.

This reinforces the idea that traditional religion is not just about formal worship, it is about how knowledge is processed, how events are interpreted, and how meaning is assigned. Colonial education may introduce new tools, but it does not fully replace the underlying cognitive and moral structure shaped by religion. Essentialist theory helps us understand this persistence. According to [Berry \(1979\)](#), cultural and religious identities in plural societies remain intact because they are grounded in core values and long-standing belief systems. Rather than being erased by multicultural interaction, essential traits are often reaffirmed in contrast to foreign systems. Achebe's story confirms this insight: even in a multicultural town like Umuru, cultural and spiritual codes remain potent forces in daily life.

4.10. The Crossroads as Metaphor: Destiny, Decision, and Disruption

The image of the crossroads in *The Sacrificial Egg* serves as a highly charged religious and metaphysical symbol. In many African cosmologies, including the Igbo worldview, the

crossroads is not just a geographical meeting point. It is a spiritual threshold, a liminal space where the boundaries between the human and divine blur. Offerings placed at crossroads are meant to reach spirits and deities that dwell in such transitional zones. In the story, the sacrificial egg is intentionally left at the crossroads by a desperate person seeking spiritual intervention:

"Someone oppressed by misfortune had brought the offering to the crossroads in the dusk."

This act reflects belief in interventionist theology, that misfortune can be reversed or mitigated through sacrifice, and that spirits patrol these in-between spaces. When Julius steps on the egg, the moment is not casual, it is a ritual transgression. While he tries to brush it off, the underlying symbolism is powerful: a modern, Western-educated man has unknowingly desecrated a sacred object and space. From an essentialist perspective, the crossroads signifies a deeper tension, not between modernity and tradition, but between knowledge systems. Julius's physical act of walking over the egg without awareness contrasts with his internal response: unease, anxiety, and fear. He does not consciously believe he has offended the gods, but his body and emotions respond as if he has. This duality shows how religious memory operates even when cultural forms appear to have shifted. The crossroads becomes a metaphor for Julius's own position: not in-between identities, but confronting a moment of moral and spiritual reckoning. Furthermore, the egg and its location symbolize intentionality and hope. The person who placed it believed in divine justice and saw the crossroads as a legitimate site of communication with the spiritual realm. Achebe does not frame this act as primitive or superstitious. Instead, he writes it with reverence, letting the reader understand that in this community, spiritual action is logical, responsive, and deeply human.

4.11. Cyclical Time and Cultural Rhythm

A key feature of religious essentialism is the conception of time not as linear, but as cyclical and sacred. This is evident in the way the community in Umuru still aligns itself to traditional market days, even after colonial restructuring. The text notes that while the market is now open daily, it remains busiest on Nkwo day, a remnant of the Igbo four-day week system. This small detail is rich with meaning. Despite colonial pressures, the spiritual clock of the community still ticks in ancestral rhythm.

"But despite this change, it was still busiest on its original Nkwo day."

This passage demonstrates the resilience of sacred time. Ritual calendars are often used in traditional religions not merely to organize activity but to align human actions with cosmic order. In Igbo cosmology, days are not arbitrary. They are governed by deities and are appropriate for certain kinds of rituals, decisions, or ceremonies. Holding the market on Nkwo day suggests that economic and social life must remain in sync with the spiritual rhythm of the universe. Achebe's inclusion of this detail is subtle but deliberate. It reminds the reader that beneath surface-level change (colonial administration, new infrastructure, and European offices) there is a continuity of indigenous worldview. Time, in this context, is not merely chronological. It is ritual time, a force that connects the community to its ancestors, gods, and moral responsibilities. The observance of Nkwo day becomes a quiet act of cultural resistance, a form of temporal defiance that allows the community to preserve its rhythm and meaning.

4.12. Quiet Narration as Cultural Resistance

Achebe's writing style in this story is not dramatic or confrontational; instead, it is deliberately subdued, observational, and precise. This narrative choice reflects the nature of religious continuity in colonized societies, not through rebellion, but through quiet perseverance. Achebe does not present his characters as openly resisting colonialism. Rather,

he shows how they continue to operate within their inherited spiritual logic, maintaining belief systems without the need for direct confrontation.

This subtlety is strategic. It mirrors how religion often survives cultural displacement, not through revolution, but through ordinary repetition. The characters do not preach about traditional values; they live them. Ma's warnings, Julius's anxiety, the presence of Kitikpa, the rhythms of the market, all are presented without ideological framing. Yet together they form a powerful network of meaning that upholds the spiritual framework of the community. In this way, Achebe participates in what may be called narrative essentialism, a technique in which the writer does not argue for the value of tradition but shows its persistence through structure and character behavior. The result is a narrative that affirms belief without needing to defend it. This approach counters the tendency in postcolonial discourse to either romanticize or critique indigenous culture. Achebe neither glorifies nor critiques; he documents, and in doing so, protects. This quiet mode of storytelling itself can be read as a religious act, a devotion to truth-telling, continuity, and reverence for what came before. The narration respects silence, ambiguity, and implied meaning, traits that also define oral religious traditions in many African cultures. In this sense, form and content are aligned: both promote the survival of cultural identity through inherited belief.

4.13. Community Memory and Moral Coherence

One of the core assumptions of essentialism is that cultural and religious identity is sustained through collective memory. In *The Sacrificial Egg*, memory is not presented through flashbacks or exposition but through symbolic continuity, rituals that are maintained, fears that are shared, and customs that are honored. Even the town's spatial layout reinforces memory. The market is held where it has always been. The crossroads remains sacred. The deity Kitikpa still returns when balance is lost. These symbols function as anchors of moral coherence. They remind the community who they are, what matters, and what consequences follow disobedience. Julius's fear is not just personal. It is tied to what the community has always believed. He knows what Kitikpa is supposed to do. He knows what happens when offerings are disrupted. He knows what Ma means when she speaks of "*those who are not real*." This knowledge is not academic. It is embodied memory, carried through generations and reinforced by shared narrative.

This communal aspect is crucial. It challenges the idea that religious belief is individual or isolated. In the Igbo context, belief is communal agreement, and the consequences of spiritual disobedience are collective. When smallpox strikes a household, the entire village is affected. This reflects the theological idea that sin, misfortune, and ritual error are not private failings but communal concerns. Achebe builds this worldview through implication. He does not explain it; he shows it. And in doing so, he reminds the reader that African religious knowledge is not linear, but holistic, not abstract, but grounded in action and environment. Characters like Julius and Ma do not reflect on these ideas intellectually. They live them through gestures, language, avoidance, and observance.

4.14. Affirming Indigenous Theology: Against the Backdrop of Postcolonial Displacement

In postcolonial African literature, one dominant theme is the erosion of indigenous systems under the pressure of colonial rule. Many narratives emphasize the loss of language, belief, structure, and identity. While this lens has illuminated the effects of colonization, it often foregrounds loss over continuity, fragmentation over resilience. What Achebe does in *The Sacrificial Egg* is offer a quiet but pointed counterargument: that African traditional religion

and culture are not so easily dismantled. They persist, not in loud protest, but in subtle rituals, emotional responses, and daily rhythms. The strength of this persistence is best understood through the lens of essentialist religious identity. Essentialism, though often criticized for being overly rigid or simplistic, in this context allows us to see how foundational beliefs remain active even under structural change. Julius, despite being educated in Western schools and working in a colonial office, remains shaped by the moral and spiritual worldview of his ancestors. His internal conflict is not due to confusion, but due to conscience, a conscience formed not by Enlightenment rationality, but by Igbo cosmology.

Rather than depicting a fractured self, Achebe shows us a coherent self-operating in multiple systems but anchored in one. Julius may live in a town influenced by Western systems, but his ethical and emotional responses are aligned with traditional belief. This is the heart of essentialism: that beneath cultural contact, core spiritual orientations endure. Achebe's narrative affirms this by refusing to resolve Julius's tension through reason or modern psychology. Instead, the story ends with emotional ambiguity, a lingering unease that is best interpreted not as crisis, but as recognition. Achebe's contribution here is twofold. First, he shows that African religion is not incompatible with complexity. It provides moral clarity, emotional depth, and cultural structure. Second, he shows that religion is not static. It adjusts, survives, and continues to guide even in modern contexts. By framing belief not as superstition, but as internalized moral logic, he reclaims indigenous religion as a serious epistemology, one that explains the world, shapes values, and defines human responsibility.

4.15. Reframing Postcolonial Identity Through Spiritual Logic

The essentialist lens also invites us to rethink the way postcolonial identity is framed in Achebe's work. Often, postcolonial identity is discussed in terms of hybridity, mimicry, or cultural ambivalence. These models suggest that colonized individuals occupy a "third space," a liminal zone where meaning is always in flux. While these theories have explanatory value, they may understate the stability of indigenous belief systems in African societies. In *The Sacrificial Egg*, there is no third space. There is a first space, grounded in religious memory and communal morality. Julius is not trapped; he is responding as his culture has trained him to. The sacrificial egg, Kitikpa, the fear of spiritual offense, these are not symbols of conflict, but of continuity. Even the silence of his fear is a cultural response; one does not always speak of divine things. One respects, feels, reacts. That, too, is knowledge.

This reframing also challenges how we understand modernity in African contexts. Modernity does not necessarily replace traditional structures. As [Berry \(1979\)](#) noted, multicultural or multiethnic societies do not inherently eliminate cultural identity. Instead, groups may hold tightly to their defining traits in response to perceived threats. What Achebe shows is that religion becomes the anchor of selfhood in a changing world. It is not diluted; it is intensified. Rather than seeing Julius as a man caught between tradition and modernity, he should be seen as a man living within modernity while grounded in tradition. This nuance is crucial. His fear of Kitikpa, his emotional response to stepping on the egg, his respect for market rhythms, all of these are rational responses within the Igbo spiritual system. The fact that he does not outwardly defy colonial logic does not mean he has surrendered to it. Instead, his belief persists quietly, inwardly, structurally.

4.16. Literary Implications: Symbolism, Structure, and Voice

Achebe's literary technique also supports this reading. The story is structured around symbolic moments rather than dramatic events. Each symbol (the egg, the market, Kitikpa) is not explained but revealed. Achebe does not interpret these elements for the reader. He

trusts the reader to recognize their weight. This narrative style is deeply aligned with African oral tradition, where meaning is often suggested rather than stated, and where the audience participates in interpretation. This narrative silence is powerful. It aligns with what previous reports have described as the African religious sensibility: spiritual truths are lived and felt, not always spoken. By writing in this way, Achebe is not only describing religious belief. He is performing it. His literary voice becomes a medium through which spiritual truth is enacted. It is this literary modesty that gives the story its enduring depth.

Consciousness and Its Relevance in Today's America. THE ACADEMIA, 5(1), 1–14. intuitively is enacted. It is this literary modesty that gives the story its enduring depth.

Furthermore, the setting itself acts as a symbolic landscape. The riverbank, the crossroads, the empty market, the office, all become charged spaces where cultural values are expressed. Space in the story is not neutral. It is coded with spiritual significance. The fact that the story ends without resolution is also telling. Achebe resists closure because belief is ongoing. There is no neat answer to Julius's fear, just as in religion, there is no complete explanation for divine punishment or spiritual imbalance. The story ends as it must: with discomfort, mystery, and reverence.

Chinua Achebe's 19th-century story 'The Sacrificial Egg' does not emphasize the clash between native cultures of Nigeria and modernity claimed by the author and other researchers but conveys an underlying message that Julius Obi and Ma cannot depart from their cultures because their identity is associated with the distinctiveness of their long-standing native cultures. To preserve their native cultures, their every action needs to be regulated by their cultural norms and ethos. But how easy is it to keep traditions intact from the imperialistic effect of the Western civilization? In "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin's character Sonny makes his best to uphold his Black cultures, challenging the Whites' culture but he ends up singing "Am I Blue?" composed by a White? This endorses the idea that it is not easy to challenge the co-existence of two cultures or a synthesis of cultures in this era marked by neoliberal capitalism (Sherma, 2025).

4.17. Closing Reflections: Religion as Epistemology and Cultural Anchor

Ultimately, *The Sacrificial Egg* is a literary affirmation of African religious essentialism. It portrays belief not as something decorative or folkloric, but as central to the characters' moral and emotional structure. Religion is not one choice among many. It is the logic that holds the world together. Achebe does not glorify this system, but he respects it. He writes it into the bones of the narrative, letting the reader feel it rather than just understand it.

This paper has shown that Julius and Ma are not disoriented victims of cultural hybridity. They are faithful carriers of a cosmology that continues to shape their lives, even when it is challenged by colonial structures. Their responses to misfortune, their ritual observances, and their emotional intuitions all point to a belief system that is intact and functional.

In reading Achebe's work through the lens of religious and cultural essentialism, we are reminded that identity is not always in flux. Sometimes, it is rooted. Sometimes, it is passed down and preserved, not loudly, but quietly, in actions, emotions, and symbols. Religion in *The Sacrificial Egg* is not just a theme; it is the architecture of the story's world. And through this world, Achebe offers a lasting reflection on how cultures endure, not by resisting change outright, but by continuing to believe, remember, and act according to a spiritual logic that precedes and outlasts colonization.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Chinua Achebe's *The Sacrificial Egg* should be read not merely as a narrative of cultural conflict but as a testament to the resilience of indigenous religion in postcolonial Africa. By applying an essentialist lens, the study has revealed how Igbo cosmology (through symbols like Kitikpa and ritual practices) continues to shape identity and moral order. Rather than depicting fragmentation, Achebe portrays spiritual continuity amid change. This interpretation challenges prevailing hybridist readings and reaffirms the significance of traditional belief systems as legitimate epistemologies in African literature and society, especially in the context of cultural survival and religious meaning.

6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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