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Visualizing Culture-Specific Terms: Multimodal Paratexts in the French Translation of *Things Fall Apart*

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ABSTRACT

Culture-specific terms in literary translation pose challenges because their meanings extend beyond language into material form, ritual practice, sound, gesture, and symbolic associations. In translated texts, explanatory footnotes are often concise and verbal, risking semantic reduction when culturally dense concepts are compressed into linear prose. While scholarship has examined culture-specific terms and paratextual mediation, less attention has been paid to how multimodal semiotic resources might supplement verbal explanation where perceptual and iconographic dimensions are central. This study investigates the French translation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, focusing on five Igbo culture-specific terms: *egwugwu*, *ekwe*, *udu*, *ogene*, and *ikenga*. Drawing on social semiotics, multimodality and paratextual theory, it explores whether concise footnotes adequately mediate culturally embedded meanings and considers the interpretive potential of multimodal supplementation. Methodologically, the research combines qualitative paratextual analysis with targeted visual complements designed to redistribute explanatory load across verbal and visual modes. Findings show that French footnotes often shift interpretation toward broad functional categories, reducing distinctions tied to materiality, ritual significance, and symbolic form. The textual analysis is supplemented by an exploratory reader-response exercise involving eight French-speaking Master's students in translation. Preliminary responses indicate that verbal-only footnotes frequently encouraged broad categorical approximations, whereas visual complements supported more differentiated descriptions. Given the limited number of participants, these observations are treated as indicative rather than generalisable and constitute

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the exploratory phase of an ongoing reader-response study. It argues that paratexts actively shape the framing of cultural difference in translation. By foregrounding modal asymmetry as a source of opacity, the study positions multimodal paratextual design as a context-sensitive strategy for mediating culturally dense texts.

Keywords: Multimodal Paratexts; Social Semiotics; Culture-Specific Terms; Literary Translation; French Translation; Igbo Cultural Forms; *Things Fall Apart*

1. Introduction

The translation of culture-specific terms (CSTs) remains one of the most persistent challenges in literary translation because such terms frequently embody linguistic, cultural, historical and symbolic meanings that resist straightforward equivalence across languages [1–3]. Many CSTs derive their significance not only from language but also from material objects, visual forms, ritual practices and culturally embedded systems of representation. Consequently, their translation extends beyond lexical substitution to encompass the mediation of cultural knowledge through various communicative resources [4,5]. Translators commonly employ paratextual devices such as footnotes, glossaries and explanatory notes to facilitate comprehension while preserving narrative continuity [6–8]. Although these strategies often improve accessibility, they also expose an important limitation: concise verbal explanations may not adequately represent cultural concepts whose meanings depend on perceptual, material and symbolic features.

This article investigates that limitation through an analysis of five Igbo culture-specific terms in the French translation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It argues that conventional footnotes tend to privilege verbal explanation while underrepresenting other dimensions of culturally embedded meaning, thereby encouraging semantic reduction and interpretive approximation. To address this problem, the study explores the use of complementary visual paratexts as an additional interpretive resource capable of supporting readers' understanding of culturally significant concepts. The study is theoretically informed by social semiotics and employs multimodality as its principal analytical framework for examining the interaction between verbal and visual resources in paratextual mediation. Building on this perspective, it proposes the concept of multimodal paratextual redistribution, which conceptualises visual supplementation as a principled redistribution of explanatory work across complementary semiotic modes rather than as a decorative addition to the translated text. By examining how verbal and visual paratexts jointly mediate culture-specific meaning, the article contributes to current debates on translation, paratextuality and cultural representation. The theoretical foundations of this approach are developed in the following section.

2. Semiotics, Multimodality and Cultural Mediation: A Theoretical Framework

This study is situated at the intersection of social semiotics, multimodality, paratextual studies, cultural translation and reader-response theory. The article brings them into dialogue to explain a common phenomenon: the difficulty of mediating culture-specific meaning through conventional verbal paratexts. The framework developed here argues that this difficulty is not simply a consequence of lexical non-equivalence or insufficient explanation. Instead, it reflects a structural mismatch between the multimodal organisation of many cultural artefacts and the predominantly verbal form through which they are represented in translation. The discussion therefore progresses from the broad principles of semiotics to multimodality as the principal analytical framework before examining how paratext and reader cognition jointly shape the interpretation of culture-specific terms.

2.1. Semiotics, Social Semiotics and the Mediation of Cultural Meaning

Semiotics provides the broad theoretical foundation for understanding how meaning is produced and communicated through signs. The pioneering work of de Saussure [9] and Peirce [10] established that meaning does not reside inherently in words but emerges through systems of signification governed by convention, interpretation and social use. Subsequent developments in social semiotics extended this understanding by demonstrating that communication is realised not only through language but also through images,

objects, gestures, spatial organisation and other culturally organised semiotic resources [11,12]. Within translation studies, this perspective has important implications because cultural knowledge is seldom encoded exclusively in verbal form. Many culture-specific terms refer to objects, institutions and practices whose meanings cannot always be adequately conveyed through the linguistic mode alone. Meaning may be distributed across verbal, visual, acoustic and other semiotic resources, whose interaction contributes to interpretation [13]. Translation therefore involves more than transferring lexical meaning; it may require attention to culturally organised semiotic resources that extend beyond language itself.

Social semiotics further emphasises that meaning is socially situated and dynamically negotiated rather than fixed or universal [14,15]. This perspective is particularly relevant to culture-specific terms because their interpretation depends upon shared cultural knowledge rather than dictionary definitions. In *Things Fall Apart*, several concepts derive their significance from interconnected relationships among material form, ritual performance, communal identity and symbolic tradition [16]. Their interpretation therefore requires access to broader semiotic structures that cannot be fully represented through lexical equivalence alone. While social semiotics explains how meaning is socially organised, the present study requires a more specific analytical framework capable of explaining how different semiotic resources cooperate during communication. This requirement leads directly to multimodality.

2.2. Multimodality as an Analytical Framework

Multimodality, developed within the tradition of social semiotics, investigates how meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes rather than through language alone [17–19]. Each communicative mode possesses distinct affordances. Language is particularly effective for sequential description, categorisation and abstract explanation, whereas visual representation is more suited to conveying material characteristics, spatial relationships and perceptual detail. Meaning therefore emerges through the complementary interaction of modes rather than the dominance of any single one. This distinction is fundamental to the present study. Although semiotics provides the overarching theoretical foundation, the phenomenon investigated here concerns the interaction between verbal and visual resources in the mediation of culture-specific meaning. For this reason, multimodality constitutes the principal analytical framework adopted throughout the article. Retaining the concept of multimodality is therefore analytically plausible, since the study examines how explanatory work may be distributed across complementary communicative modes.

From this perspective, many of the challenges associated with translating culture-specific terms can be understood as instances of modal reduction. Meanings originally distributed across material, visual and symbolic resources become compressed into concise verbal explanations, altering the semiotic organisation through which they are ordinarily interpreted [20]. This observation provides the conceptual basis for examining paratextual mediation.

2.3. Paratextuality and Translation: Mediation under Constraint

Paratext constitutes the principal interface through which translators mediate unfamiliar cultural knowledge for target readers. Genette [7] conceptualises paratext as a threshold that regulates access to the text, while Batchelor [6] demonstrates its particular significance within translation, where explanatory devices frequently compensate for disparities in linguistic and cultural knowledge. Footnotes, glossaries and translator's notes therefore perform an important interpretive function by orienting readers towards unfamiliar cultural references. Nevertheless, the explanatory capacity of conventional paratext is constrained by its predominantly verbal and linear form. Research across diverse translation contexts indicates that footnotes frequently privilege brevity, immediate intelligibility and narrative continuity at the expense of cultural specificity [2,3,21,22]. Material characteristics, ritual functions and symbolic associations are often condensed into general descriptive categories that facilitate basic comprehension but reduce interpretive richness.

The issue is therefore not simply that information is omitted. Rather, the semiotic organisation of culturally embedded concepts is transformed when multimodally constituted meaning is mediated exclusively through verbal explanation. This suggests that the limitations of conventional paratext are structural rather than merely stylistic and invites consideration of how complementary semiotic resources may extend its explanatory capacity.

2.4. Cultural Aesthetics, Reader Cognition and Multimodal Interpretation

The need for multimodal mediation becomes more apparent when considered from the combined perspectives of African expressive traditions and reader cognition. Research on African cultural aesthetics demonstrates that cultural artefacts may derive their significance from the interaction of material form, movement, sound, spatial organisation and symbolic performance rather than from verbal designation alone[5]. This understanding is reinforced by recent work on culture-specific items in multimodal translation, which conceptualises such items as cultural concepts or references rather than simply words and demonstrates that their meanings may be realised through multiple semiotic resources[23]. Objects such as *egwugwu*, *ekwe*, *udu*, *ogene* and *ikenga* can therefore be approached as components of wider cultural systems rather than as isolated lexical items. Reader-response theory provides a complementary explanation of why this complexity may present interpretive challenges. Iser[24] and Eco[25] argue that readers actively construct meaning by drawing upon existing cultural schemata. When those schemata are absent, interpretation depends increasingly upon inference, making simplification and cultural misrecognition more likely. Recent research on multimedia learning further indicates that appropriately designed integration of verbal and visual resources can support comprehension and learning while helping to manage cognitive load[26–28]. These perspectives suggest that the mediation of culture-specific meaning depends not only on explanatory adequacy but also on the alignment between the semiotic organisation of the translated representation and the interpretive resources available to readers.

2.5. Towards Multimodal Paratextual Redistribution

The preceding discussion converges on a common conclusion. Semiotics explains how meaning is socially organised, multimodality demonstrates how it is distributed across complementary communicative modes, paratextual theory identifies where cultural mediation occurs in translation and reader-response theory clarifies how that mediation is interpreted. Collectively, these perspectives indicate that many limitations of conventional footnotes arise because multimodally organised cultural meanings are represented through a single communicative mode. This study therefore proposes the concept of multimodal paratextual redistribution. Rather than treating visual supplementation as an optional enhancement or decorative illustration, the framework conceptualises it as a principled redistribution of explanatory work across complementary verbal and visual modes. By aligning the semiotic organisation of the translated representation more closely with that of the source phenomenon, multimodal paratextual redistribution seeks to preserve cultural specificity while improving interpretive accessibility for target readers. This framework provides the conceptual foundation for the analytical procedures and case studies presented in the following sections.

3. Research Design and Methodology

Building on the theoretical framework established in Section 2, this study examines the treatment of culture-specific terms (CSTs) in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*[29] and its French translation, *Tout s'effondre*[30]. The French edition contains nineteen CSTs accompanied by explanatory footnotes. From this set, five items (*egwugwu*, *ekwe*, *udu*, *ogene* and *ikenga*) were selected for focused analysis. These terms were chosen because their interpretation relies substantially on material, ritual, visual, and cultural dimensions, making them particularly suitable for evaluating the explanatory scope of verbal paratexts.

3.1. Analytic Procedure

The methodological procedure was organised into three interrelated stages designed to operationalise the conceptual framework outlined earlier.

a. Identification and Contextual Examination of CSTs: All nineteen CSTs marked by footnotes in the French translation were extracted and examined in both the source text and the target text. Particular attention was given to the narrative environments in which the terms occur, including their functional, ritual, symbolic and material associations. This stage established the contextual parameters necessary for assessing how meaning is constructed around each item within the narrative.

b. Evaluation of French Footnotes: The French footnotes accompanying the identified CSTs were subsequently examined in relation to their explanatory adequacy. The assessment was guided by three analytical criteria derived from the theoretical framework:
   - Semantic articulation, referring to the extent to which the footnote conveys the contextual meaning of the term;
   - Cultural pertinence, referring to the preservation of culturally significant material, ritual or symbolic dimensions; and
   - Reader orientation, referring to the degree to which the note assists readers who may lack familiarity with Igbo cultural references.

The purpose of this stage was to identify patterns in the verbal representation of culturally embedded concepts and to determine areas where concise lexical explanation alone may prove insufficient.

3.2. Development and Use of Targeted Visual Complements

For the five focal CSTs, visual supplements were introduced where additional perceptual support was considered necessary for contextual interpretation. These visuals consisted of representative depictions of *egwugwu*, *ekwe*, *udu*, *ogene* and *ikenga* and were incorporated as complementary paratextual elements alongside the verbal footnotes. Rather than replacing textual explanation, the images functioned as supplementary interpretive aids intended to make relevant material and iconographic features available for comparative analysis.

3.3. Evaluative Criteria

The effectiveness of the combined verbal-visual paratexts was assessed according to three practical criteria:

a. Semantic clarity: whether the paratext facilitates a more accurate understanding of the CST within its narrative context;
b. Cultural pertinence: whether culturally significant material, ritual and symbolic features are retained; and
c. Pedagogic utility: whether the paratext assists readers who lack prior familiarity with the relevant cultural framework.

These criteria provided a consistent basis for evaluating both the French footnotes and the supplementary visual materials. The visual materials were selected or designed according to their analytical functions rather than for decorative purposes. **Figure 1** was developed by the authors as a conceptual schema illustrating the analytical rationale for multimodal paratextual redistribution. The comparative representations of *ekwe*, *udu* and *ogene* were produced by an artist following detailed specifications prepared and reviewed by the authors. The *ikenga* illustration combines an author-designed iconographic key with reference to a documented museum object. Throughout the study, the visual materials function as analytical complements intended to support interpretation rather than as exhaustive ethnographic representations.

Figure 1 schematically contrasts two complementary modes of paratextual mediation. The left-hand side represents the outcome of a verbal gloss alone. Although a concise textual definition enables readers to recognise the general category of an unfamiliar object (for example, “drum,” “mask,” or “wooden figure”), it often leaves important perceptual dimensions unspecified. Material composition, shape, texture, scale, spatial organisation, gesture, and other culturally meaningful features remain largely inaccessible, requiring readers to construct mental images from their own cultural experience. The right-hand side illustrates how the addition of carefully selected visual cues redistributes part of the explanatory burden from language to image. Rather than replacing verbal explanation, the visual component complements it by making salient those perceptual features that are difficult to describe economically in prose. The interaction between verbal and visual resources therefore supports a more culturally grounded interpretation, reduces interpretive ambiguity, and enables readers to construct richer mental representations of unfamiliar cultural artefacts. In this sense, the figure visually summarises the central proposition of this article: multimodal paratextual redistribution enhances the mediation of culture-specific terms by allocating explanatory work across complementary semiotic modes rather than relying exclusively on verbal description.

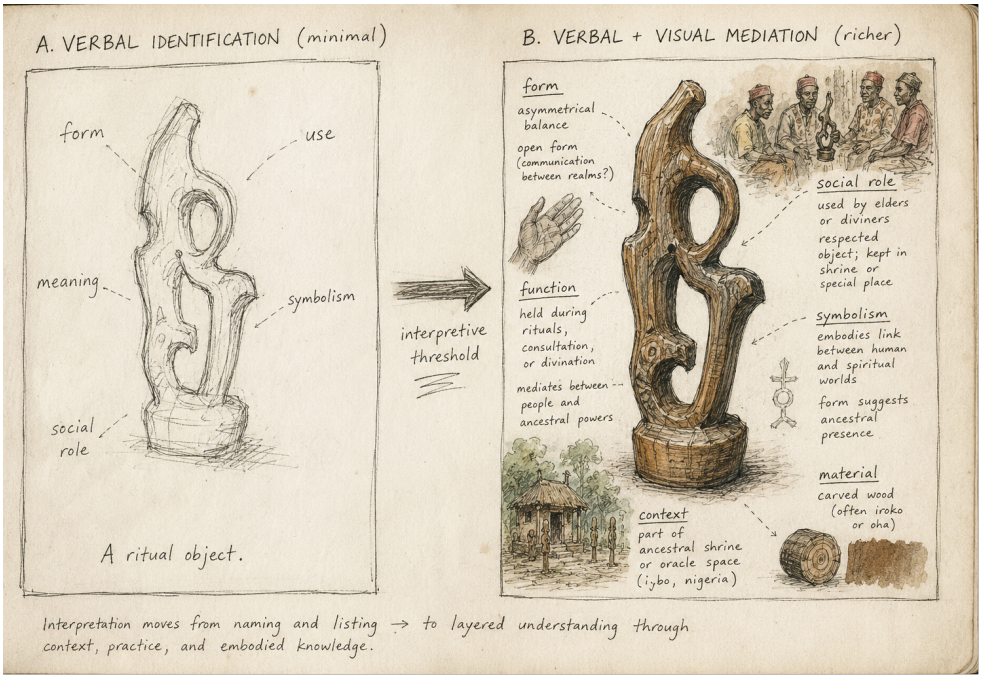


Figure 1. Verbal gloss alone permits only categorical recognition of an unfamiliar artifact, while selective visual cues anchor interpretation by situating it within a cultural frame.

3.4. Exploratory Reader-Response Exercise

To supplement the textual and multimodal analysis, an exploratory reader-response exercise was conducted with eight native speakers of French enrolled in a Master's programme in translation at the University of Liège, Belgium. The exercise formed the preliminary phase of an ongoing investigation into how culturally unfamiliar readers interpret culture-specific terms under different paratextual conditions. Its purpose was not to establish findings generalisable to French-speaking readers as a whole but to identify initial interpretive patterns and assess the viability of the design for a more extensive study. Participants were presented with short contextualised excerpts containing *egwugwu*, *ekwe*, *udu*, *ogene* and *ikenga* from the French translation [30]. In the first phase, they described their understanding of each term using the excerpt and its verbal footnote. In the second phase, the same terms were presented with the relevant visual complements alongside the verbal explanations. Brief written responses from both phases were examined qualitatively for categorical approximation, interpretive uncertainty and perceptual differentiation. The responses were used as supplementary qualitative evidence rather than as an independent test of the effectiveness of multimodal paratexts. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained and responses were anonymised before analysis.

3.5. Scope and Methodological Limitations

The reader-response exercise was limited to eight participants from a single Master's programme and cannot be treated as representative of French-speaking readers generally. In addition, all participants encountered the verbal-only condition before the verbal-visual condition. The exercise cannot therefore fully separate the effect of visual supplementation from possible repetition, learning or order effects. The responses are interpreted as preliminary and indicative and constitute the exploratory phase of an ongoing reader-response study involving a larger participant group and a more systematically controlled design.

4. Corpus, Analytical Orientation and Data

Table 1 presents the nineteen CSTs identified in the French translation of *Things Fall Apart* [29] together with their accompanying footnote definitions in *Tout s'effondre* [30]. English translations of the original French footnotes are also provided. The five focal CSTs selected for detailed analysis are highlighted. The table establishes the broader paratextual context within which the subsequent analysis of the selected terms is situated.

Table 1. Culture-specific terms flagged with footnotes in the French translation; French notes reproduced verbatim.

Page	CSTs	Footnotes	English Translation of French Footnotes
13	egwugwu	Hommes du clan qui, lors de certains rituels, portent des masques et transmettent la parole des esprits.	Men of the clan who, during certain rituals, wear masks and act as messengers of the spirits of the land.
14	l' ekwe, du udu et de l' ogene	Tambour, gong et pot d' argile.	Drum, gong and clay pot.
33	huit marchés	La semaine ibo comporte quatre jours, et le marché a lieu le premier jour de la semaine. Une période de huit marchés cor respond donc à trente-deux jours.	The Igbo week consists of four days, and the market takes place on the first day of the week. A period of eight markets therefore corresponds to thirty-two days.
44	l' udala	Chrysophyllum albidum, arbre fruitier tropical également connu sous le nom de caïmite africaine.	Chrysophyllum albidum, a tropical fruit tree also known as African star apple.
81	l' uli	Liquide obtenu à partir d' une graine, qu' on utilise pour tracer des dessins sur la peau.	Liquid obtained from a seed, used to draw designs on the skin.
86	l' iba	Fièvre de type malaria.	A malaria-like fever.
88	Oye	La semaine ibo compte quatre jours: eke, oye, afo, et nkwo.	The Igbo week has four days: Eke, Oye, Afo and Nkwo.
90	l' iyi-uwa	Pierre magique qui relie l' enfant ogbanje au monde des esprits. L' enfant n' échappe à la mort que si la pierre est mise au jour.	A magical stone linking the ogbanje child to the spirit world. The child escapes death only if the stone is discovered.
121	l' uri	Correspond au moment des fiançailles où la dot achève d' être payée.	Refers to the stage of the engagement during which the bride price is fully paid.
121	umunna	La famille élargie, le clan (surtout des hommes).	The extended family or clan, especially the men.
141	ochu	Crime, meurtre.	Crime, murder.
143	isa-ifi	Cérémonie durant laquelle, quand une femme a vécu loin de son fiancé ou de son mari un certain temps, on vérifie qu' elle n' a pas été infidèle pendant la période de séparation.	A ceremony during which, when a woman has lived away from her fiancé or husband for some time, it is verified that she has not been unfaithful during the separation period.
144	d' umuada	La famille élargie, le clan (surtout des femmes).	The extended family or clan, especially the women.
178	egusi	Graines de melon accommodées en soupe.	Melon seeds prepared as soup.
186	ozo	L' un des titres de clan.	One of the clan titles.
189	kotma	"Auxiliaire de la Cour"—le mot, qui n' est pas d' origine ibo, est la contraction déformée de court messenger.	"Court messenger" assistant—the term, which is not of Igbo origin, is a distorted contraction of court messenger.
193	l' ikenga	Figure de bois sculpté que tout homme possède et qui symbolise la force de la main droite.	A carved wooden figure that every man owns and that symbolizes the strength of the right hand.

4.1. Visualising the Limits of Verbal Footnotes

Before turning to the five selected CSTs in detail, it is important to illustrate why text-only explanations struggle to convey the material or symbolic density of certain Igbo objects and practices. Brief verbal glosses typically supply only categorical information (e.g., "drum," "mask," "wooden figure"). However, such terms rarely capture features like material composition, morphology, gesture, ritual setting or sound quality. These are some of the features that are essential for culturally accurate interpretation.

Figure 1 contrasts the interpretive space opened by a brief verbal definition with the richer inferences made possible through selective visual supplementation. The left panel depicts how a minimal gloss allows for only rudimentary recognition, while the right panel shows how visual cues (texture, form, spatial context) anchor interpretation within a more accurate cultural frame. The figure also highlights a cognitive dimension: when readers lack the cultural schemas needed to imagine unfamiliar objects, the absence of visual cues increases interpretive ambiguity. Multimodal supplementation therefore operates not as decoration but as a perceptual bridge, reducing uncertainty and supporting more grounded meaning-making.

4.2. Transition to Item Level Analysis

With these structural limitations in view, we now turn to a detailed examination of the five focal CSTs. The analysis proceeds by pairing each French footnote with a targeted visual complement, assessing how the combined paratext improves semantic clarity, cultural resonance, and reader orientation. For ease of reference, all examples cite the chapter and page numbers of the French translation, as pagination in the English source text varies across editions.

4.2.1. *Egwugwu*: Internal Variation and the Limits of Verbal Footnotes

The term *egwugwu* is one of the most culturally layered items in *Things Fall Apart* [29]. Although it occurs thirty-two

times in the novel, its meaning is not identical across all narrative contexts. Achebe presents *egwugwu* in at least two related but distinguishable registers: a festive and performative mode associated with music, dance and communal entertainment, and a solemn ritual-judicial mode associated with ancestral authority and the adjudication of disputes. This internal variation is important to understanding the institution's place in Igbo society because it demonstrates that *egwugwu* cannot be adequately reduced to a single appearance or social function.

At its first occurrence in the French translation, on page 13 of Chapter 1 [30], the term is accompanied by a footnote that may be rendered in English as follows: "Men of the clan who, during certain rituals, wear masks and act as messengers of the spirits of the land." Although this explanation is not inaccurate, it foregrounds the ritual and ancestral dimension that characterises most subsequent appearances of *egwugwu* in the novel. The immediate narrative context of the first occurrence is, however, different. Achebe introduces *egwugwu* in connection with Unoka's musical troupe. Unoka's lack of titles and his attachment to music position this episode outside the formal judicial sphere. In this context, the dancing *egwugwu* participate in a travelling performance associated with music and communal entertainment rather than dispute adjudication.

This opening reference is the only occurrence in which *egwugwu* is situated principally within a musical-performance context. Later appearances assume a more solemn character, particularly when titled men embody ancestral authority and preside over communal disputes. The initial festive manifestation and the later ritual-judicial manifestation should not be treated as unrelated meanings. Rather, they represent different contextual actualisations of an institution in which masking, performance, communal participation and ancestral representation intersect. Because the French footnote introduces the ritual interpretation at the point of first encounter, readers may apply that meaning retrospectively to the festive episode and consequently overlook the contextual breadth briefly established by Achebe.

Part of this interpretive difficulty arises from the structural limitations of concise verbal paratext. A short footnote cannot easily communicate costume, bodily movement, spatial arrangement, performance context, social function and symbolic significance at the same time. Nor can it efficiently demonstrate how the outward form of *egwugwu* may vary according to whether the figures appear as a performing group or as embodiments of ancestral and judicial authority. For readers without prior familiarity with Igbo masking traditions, verbal compression may therefore encourage an undifferentiated understanding of *egwugwu* as merely "masked messengers of the spirits."

A prototypical composite illustration can supplement the verbal note by making this contextual variation perceptible. **Figure 2** juxtaposes two representative configurations: the collective assembly of masked ancestral figures and the dynamic appearance of an individual masquerade performer. The illustration does not reproduce a particular episode from Achebe's novel or claim to document every regional form of *egwugwu*. Instead, it provides an interpretive visual aid through which readers can recognise differences in bodily arrangement, movement, costume, audience relationship and ceremonial setting.

Figure 2a emphasises collectivity, ordered seating and the relationship between masked figures and members of the community. These visual features support the solemn and institutional character that becomes prominent in the novel's judicial scenes. **Figure 2b** foregrounds movement, bodily energy, raffia costume and the presence of spectators, thereby making the performative dimension more immediately accessible. The juxtaposition does not establish a rigid opposition between "judicial" and "festive" forms, since performance remains integral to ritual embodiment and ancestral representation. Rather, it shows how emphasis shifts according to context: from dynamic public performance to the collective enactment of ritual authority. The visual comparison consequently clarifies a limitation involving contextual plurality rather than lexical meaning or morphology alone. A conventional footnote normally presents a stable and economical definition, whereas Achebe's narrative allows the cultural institution to assume different functions and degrees of solemnity in different settings. By placing the two configurations alongside one another, the composite illustration enables readers to perceive the internal variation that the verbal footnote compresses. The multimodal supplement therefore does not replace the footnote; it expands its interpretive capacity by showing how performance, masking, communal spectatorship and ancestral authority coexist within the cultural range of *egwugwu*.



Figure 2. Prototypical configurations of *egwugwu*: (**a**) The collective assembly of masked ancestral figures associated with communal and ritual authority; (**b**) An individual masked performer in ceremonial motion, highlighting the performative dimensions of costume, dance and public spectatorship.
Source: Prototypical composite illustration developed for the study.

4.2.2. *Ekwe*, *Udu* and *Ogene*: Materiality, Sound and Categorical Reduction

Although Achebe presents these instruments as part of a rich sonic environment that Unoka recalls vividly, the French translation [30] reduces them to the generic labels "drum, gong and clay pot" (p. 14). The ordering of these labels in the footnote also differs from the narrative sequence (Achebe lists *ekwe*, *udu* and *ogene*, whereas the footnote gives "drum, gong and clay pot")—a small divergence that may momentarily unsettle readers who do not already recognise these items. Taken together, these glosses provide only broad categorical information and omit the perceptual and functional distinctions that structure the novel's soundscape. In the narrative, *ekwe*, *udu* and *ogene* appear as three distinct idiophones with different materials, forms and acoustic properties. The *ekwe* is a wooden slit drum capable of producing resonant, speech-like tones; the *udu* is a clay pot idiophone whose sound results from airflow manipulation; and the *ogene* is a forged metal hand gong used for bright, percussive timekeeping. For readers familiar with Igbo cultural practices, these distinctions are immediately recognisable. However, for readers without such familiarity, the generic glosses "drum," "gong" and "clay pot" may encourage mental images shaped by their own cultural frames of reference. Narrative context signals that these are musical instruments, yet the lack of visual or material cues may still lead some readers to imagine the *udu* as a typical storage vessel rather than a purpose-built idiophone, or to picture the *ekwe* as a cylindrical European drum rather than a slit drum with communicative functions.

These interpretive risks do not reflect a failure of translation but arise from the structural limits of concise verbal paratext. A single compressed footnote cannot simultaneously convey material composition, morphology, handling technique and sonic quality. Narrative context helps, but it cannot fully compensate for the absence of perceptual cues for readers unfamiliar with these instruments. A multimodal paratext can help mitigate these limitations by making perceptual distinctions visible. A visual key showing the three instruments (rendered with attention to material, form and playing posture) allows differences between wood, clay and metal, as well as between slit drum, pot idiophone and gong morphology, to become immediately intelligible in ways that concise prose cannot achieve.

Figure 3 thus functions not as an illustration but as a semiotic complement. It anchors interpretation by depicting features central to meaning (material composition, morphology, sound-producing surfaces and typical handling positions). Once these distinctions are visually present, the reader

is better positioned to understand why Achebe's recollection of Unoka's musical world depends on the interplay of these instruments rather than on generic categories. In this way, multimodal supplementation enhances paratextual mediation by restoring cultural specificity where verbal economy necessitates reduction. The visual complement enables readers to construct a more accurate mental model of the objects and practices referenced in the text, thereby supporting a more informed engagement with Achebe's sonic and cultural landscape.

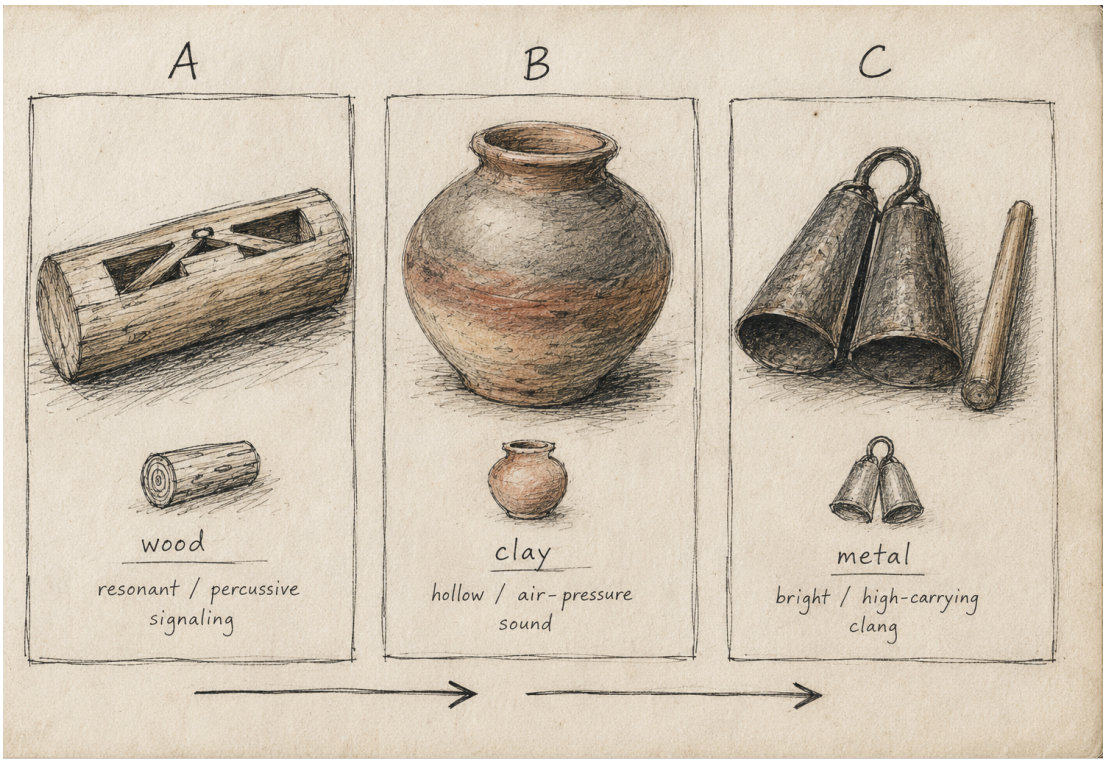


Figure 3. Composite sketch of Igbo musical signalling instruments: (**a**) *ekwe* (slit drum, wood); (**b**) *udu* (pot idiophone, clay); (**c**) *ogene* (hand gong, metal).

The analysis now turns to *ikenga*, the final item in the selected set.

4.2.3. *Ikenga*: Iconographic Form, Symbolic Density, and the Limits of Verbal Reduction

Among the five focal CSTs, *ikenga* most clearly illustrates the difficulty of conveying culturally dense objects through concise verbal footnotes. In Achebe's novel [29], *ikenga* appears in a domestic interior, hanging from Akunna's rafters during his conversation with Mr. Brown. Its positioning signals the object's presence in everyday social and ritual space without extended exposition. Although the narrative reference is brief, scholarship consistently associates *ikenga*, across many Igbo communities, with personal agency, achievement, ancestral sanction and the ritualised symbolism of the right hand [31–34]. These associations are expressed through characteristic visual forms, including the horned head, the emphasised right hand, implements or trophies, carved bodily markings and seated or standing postures. These features are central to recognition but difficult to communicate through compressed prose [35,36].

The French translation [30] renders *ikenga* as "a carved wooden figure that every man possesses and that symbolizes the strength of the right hand." This gloss communicates one important dimension of the object but compresses its material, ritual and iconographic specificity. For readers unfamiliar with Igbo traditions, the undifferentiated category "wooden figure" leaves its horns, posture, implements, bodily markings and shrine placement unstated. It consequently risks flattening an object that, within its source-cultural context, can index identity, spiritual continuity, personal aspiration and socially recognised accomplishment. This interpretive

gap follows partly from the constraints of verbal peritext. A short note cannot efficiently convey the visual logic through which *ikenga* communicates meaning. Iconographic elements such as the horn motif, the emphasis placed on the right hand, the presence of tools or trophies, carved markings and seated or standing postures are primarily perceptual. Without visual cues, readers may default to generic assumptions about "African woodcarving" that do not correspond to Igbo cultural frameworks.

A multimodal paratext can mitigate these limitations by making the object's iconographic structure visible. A targeted diagram identifying its principal visual components gives readers immediate perceptual access to features important for recognition and interpretation. By seeing the relationship among the horns, hands, implements, posture and altar platform, readers are better positioned to understand how *ikenga* materially encodes ideas of personal agency, accomplishment, ancestral support and right-hand potency. **Figure 4** isolates selected formal features and presents them in an analytically legible format that supports, rather than replaces, the verbal footnote. The diagram clarifies distinctions that would otherwise require extensive textual explanation and enables readers to recognise *ikenga* as a culturally codified form rather than as an undifferentiated wooden sculpture. The relationship among the horns, dominant right hand, implements, bodily markings, seated posture and altar platform demonstrates how the object's material configuration contributes to its symbolic density. The diagram should not be understood as representing every historical or regional form of *ikenga*. Rather, it functions as an interpretive aid that identifies recurring iconographic features relevant to the present analysis. By combining the concise verbal gloss with this visual supplement, the paratext provides access to formal and symbolic dimensions that may be lost through verbal compression. This multimodal approach does not eliminate the cultural gap, but it narrows it and supports a more grounded and culturally coherent understanding of *ikenga* within Achebe's narrative.

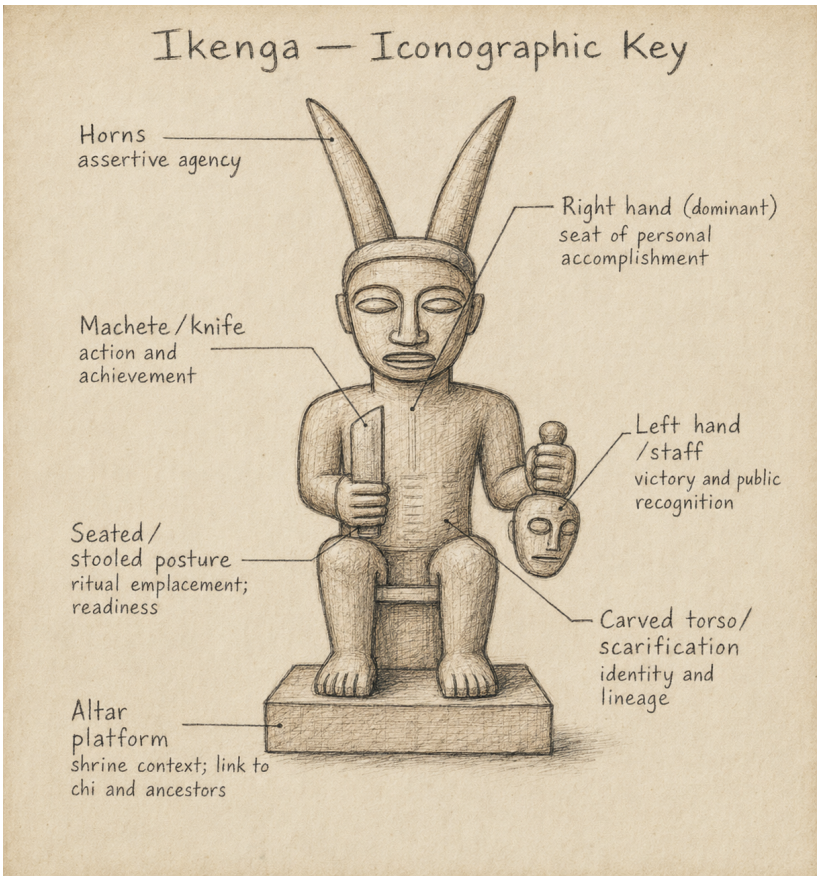


Figure 4. *Ikenga* iconographic key. Annotated interpretive illustration showing selected recurring features associated with *ikenga*, including the horns, dominant right hand, implement, left-hand attribute, seated posture, carved bodily markings and altar platform.
Source: Illustration by Obuba Arts.

5. Discussion

From the foregoing arguments, this section introduces multimodal paratextual redistribution as a strategy for preserving culturally codified specificity and examines how reader purpose, cultural distance and editorial context shape the usefulness of such interventions. It concludes by outlining the model's scope and limits and by situating paratextual design within broader questions about how cultural difference is framed in translation.

5.1. Structural Monomodality and Semiotic Reduction

The analyses indicate that the central issue is not simple informational loss but structural monomodality in paratextual mediation. Footnotes, by convention, operate within the limits of linear prose and editorial concision. When they mediate objects whose meanings are materially, visually and acoustically structured, they tend to recast those objects into broad functional categories familiar to the target readership. This does not necessarily produce inaccuracy. It shifts semiotic weight toward taxonomic equivalence. In the cases examined, *egwugwu* is framed through ritual authority, *ekwe*, *udu* and *ogene* are reduced to abstract instrument types, and *ikenga* becomes a generic carved figure. The perceptual and iconographic distinctions that organise meaning within Igbo semiotic frameworks recede behind classificatory labels. Such recategorisation aligns with the economy of verbal paratext described in Section 2.1, yet it also exposes a structural limitation. Monomodal explanation struggles to preserve distinctions that are encoded multimodally in the source culture. From a multimodal perspective, this outcome is predictable. Kress and van Leeuwen[19] argue that semiotic modes possess distinct affordances. Language is efficient for propositional and categorical description but less suited to conveying morphology, posture, material texture or spatial configuration in compressed form. When culturally dense objects are mediated solely through linguistic gloss, semiotic asymmetry emerges. The resulting opacity is not only aesthetic indeterminacy but the by-product of modal mismatch.

5.2. Multimodal Paratextual Redistribution within a Social Semiotic Framework

The model advanced here, termed multimodal paratextual redistribution, treats visual supplementation not as illustrative embellishment but as a strategic reallocation of explanatory load across semiotic modes. Rather than expanding discursive thickness in Appiah's sense of "thick translation"[37], the approach diversifies semiotic channels to preserve culturally codified distinctions that are materially structured yet difficult to encode concisely in prose. Within this framework, visual schemata function as analytical devices. They isolate features such as morphology, gesture, material composition and spatial arrangement that are central to recognition within Igbo cultural logics. The aim is not exhaustive ethnographic documentation or aesthetic display. It is to stabilise interpretation where categorical gloss risks flattening symbolic density. This intervention also reframes the function of paratext. Paratexts do more than add supplementary information; they shape the epistemological framing of cultural difference. When they recode culturally specific forms into generic target culture categories, they contribute to subtle processes of domestication, even when foreign terms are retained[38]. Multimodal redistribution seeks to counter this tendency by preserving perceptual and iconographic specificity without displacing the foreign lexical item.

5.3. Reader Purpose, Cultural Distance and the Politics of Paratext

The relevance of multimodal supplementation depends on reading purpose. Reading is widely understood as goal-directed and schema-dependent[24,39]. A reader focused on narrative progression may not require detailed material or iconographic specification. An ethnographer, translation scholar or student working in a pedagogical context may seek greater cultural precision. These modes of engagement are not hierarchical. They are purposive. The proposal is therefore context-sensitive. It is most applicable to annotated, scholarly or pedagogical editions in which interpretive precision forms part of the reading objective. It does not assume that all readers require maximal cultural information or that literary texts should be saturated with explanation. Narrative gaps can be aesthetically productive. Yet not all opacity functions as aesthetic indeterminacy. In cross-cultural contexts, some ambiguities arise from semiotic mismatch rather than narrative design. Where perceptual distinctions are structurally meaningful within the source culture yet inaccessible through compressed verbal gloss, selective clarification can support rather than diminish reader agency. This position

intersects with debates on the politics of paratext and foreignisation. Paratextual interventions shape how cultural difference is framed. Visual supplements, if presented as spectacle, risk reinforcing exoticising tendencies or catering to an external appetite for cultural display. The model proposed here avoids such dynamics by treating images as heuristic schemata rather than ethnographic exhibits. Their function is analytical, not ornamental. They do not claim to reproduce ritual life in its fullness or to provide authoritative cultural closure. They render visible those formal features upon which meaning is structurally organised. The argument also resists the assumption that insider knowledge constitutes the normative benchmark for interpretation. The claim is not grounded in personal familiarity but in the observation that certain distinctions are culturally codified and materially instantiated. When these distinctions are systematically recoded into generic categories, interpretive possibilities narrow in ways that may be invisible to culturally distant readers. Multimodal redistribution addresses this structural issue without relieving the reader of interpretive responsibility.

5.4. Scope and Limits of the Model

The findings derive from five culture-specific terms within a single French translation of Achebe's novel [30]. They should not be generalised uncritically to all literary translation contexts. Verbal paratext remains a flexible and often sufficient mediating tool. The model does not imply inherent deficiency in linguistic explanation, nor does it advocate universal visual supplementation. It identifies a specific translational tension: the mediation of culturally dense multimodal objects through monomodal explanatory conventions. Where such tension produces systematic semiotic reduction, multimodal redistribution offers one possible strategy. Further research, including empirical reader-response studies across diverse readerships and purposes, would clarify the cognitive and interpretive effects of this approach and assess its applicability beyond the present corpus. These considerations show that paratextual design is not merely an editorial preference. It shapes how cultural specificity is framed, stabilised or transformed in translation. By foregrounding semiotic redistribution as a translational concern, this study draws attention to the modal assumptions that underlie paratextual practice and to their implications for the representation of cultural difference.

5.5. Preliminary Reader-Response Findings

To complement the textual and multimodal analysis presented above, a small-scale exploratory reader-response exercise was conducted with eight native speakers of French enrolled in a Master's programme in translation at the University of Liège (Belgium). Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymised. The exercise was designed to obtain an initial indication of how readers without prior familiarity with Igbo cultural forms interpret culture-specific terms (CSTs) when mediated through concise verbal footnotes, and how their interpretations shift when selective visual complements are introduced. Participants were presented with short contextualised excerpts containing a subset of the CSTs analysed in this study (*egwugwu*, *ekwe*, *udu*, *ogene* and *ikenga*), drawn from the French translation [30]. In a first phase, they were asked to describe their understanding of each item based solely on the accompanying footnotes. In a second phase, the same items were presented with the visual complements developed in this article. Participants provided brief written comments in both phases. The responses were examined qualitatively to identify recurring interpretive patterns, with particular attention to forms of approximation, uncertainty and differentiation.

In the verbal-only condition, participant interpretations frequently relied on familiar target culture categories. The term *ekwe* was often assimilated to a conventional drum ("tambour"), suggesting a membrane-based instrument typical of Western musical traditions. Likewise, *udu* was in several cases understood as a domestic container rather than as a sound-producing instrument, with one participant noting that it "semble être un récipient ordinaire." ("appears to be an ordinary vessel.") In the case of *ikenga*, the gloss "figure de bois sculpté" ("carved wooden figure") prompted generalised associations with African sculpture, with little reference to specific iconographic features. These responses point to a tendency toward categorical approximation in the absence of perceptual cues, consistent with the semiotic reduction discussed earlier. A second recurring feature of the verbal-only condition was interpretive hesitation. Participants frequently qualified their responses using markers such as "probablement," ("probably,") "j' imagine," ("I imagine,") or "cela pourrait être," ("it could be,") indicating uncertainty in the mental representations constructed from concise verbal glosses. While the footnotes provided a basic semantic

frame, they did not consistently stabilise interpretation for readers lacking relevant cultural schemata.

When visual complements were introduced, participant responses became more specific and more confident. Descriptions of *ekwe* shifted toward recognition of a hollowed wooden instrument struck to produce sound, while *udu* was more accurately identified as a clay pot used in sound production through airflow. For *ikenga*, participants explicitly referred to features such as horns and the prominence of the right hand, linking these to interpretations of strength or personal agency. These changes suggest that visual cues facilitate the construction of more differentiated and culturally aligned mental models by rendering material and iconographic features immediately perceptible. Although limited in scale, these observations provide supplementary support for the broader argument that concise verbal footnotes may leave key perceptual and symbolic distinctions underdetermined for culturally unfamiliar readers. The introduction of targeted visual complements appears to reduce interpretive ambiguity and enhance reader orientation, not by replacing verbal explanation but by redistributing explanatory load across semiotic modes. The findings are indicative rather than generalisable, but they provide empirical grounding for the semiotic patterns identified in the textual analysis.

6. Conclusions

This article has shown that the translation of culture-specific terms (CSTs) in *Things Fall Apart* [29] presents challenges that exceed the explanatory capacity of concise verbal footnotes. Focusing on five terms drawn from the French translation [30], the analysis demonstrated how meaning grounded in perceptual cues (such as form, materiality, sound, posture or iconographic patterning) can be difficult to convey through compressed prose alone. The study proposed a multimodal approach in which selected visual supplements work alongside verbal notes to support readers' engagement with culturally embedded items. Rather than replacing textual explanation, these visual cues function as concise interpretive aids, the kind that make certain perceptual distinctions more immediately accessible and help to orient readers who may lack prior familiarity with Igbo cultural forms. The contribution of this article lies in outlining a practical way for translators and editors to incorporate multimodal paratexts in a manner that remains attentive to narrative flow and respectful of cultural specificity. While the approach is selective and context-dependent, it offers a viable strategy for mediating culturally dense terms whose meanings extend beyond what brief footnotes can adequately convey. Further research, including empirical reader-response studies and comparative analyses across languages and editions, would help clarify how such multimodal interventions function in practice and how they might be adapted to different editorial environments. While grounded in social semiotic theory, the study demonstrates that multimodality provides a more precise analytical framework for examining how verbal and visual resources jointly mediate culture-specific meaning in translation.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, J.F.N.; methodology, J.F.N.; formal analysis, J.F.N.; investigation, J.F.N.; data curation, E.K.J.; visualization, J.F.N.; writing—original draft preparation, J.F.N.; writing—review and editing, J.F.N. and E.K.J.; supervision, J.F.N. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because the reader-response exercise involved voluntary, anonymous participation and posed no identifiable risk to participants.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the reader-response exercise. Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymised prior to analysis.

Data Availability Statement

The data generated during the exploratory reader-response exercise are not publicly available because they form part of an ongoing research programme and are subject to ethical and confidentiality considerations.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for limited language refinement and organisational assistance. All AI-assisted outputs were reviewed, edited, and approved by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity, accuracy, and originality of the work.

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