

# Colonialism: Colonization's Impact on Indigenous Family Life

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## Abstract

Assimilation was required by Indigenous North Americans and Africans in response to European colonization, serving the needs of the colonizers but irreparably disrupting Indigenous family life like increased parental stress, changes to the underlying family structure, and family division. This research paper provides supportive underlying assertions with references to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and four journal articles. The author contends that only through decolonization and reconciliation can Indigenous peoples reverse some of these negative consequences. Indigenous people can reclaim their cultural and psychological freedoms through decolonization to obtain their sovereignty, like self-manage their land, culture, customs, and political systems.

*Keywords: Colonization, Indigenous Family Life, Boarding Schools, Parental Stress, Family Unit, Religious Conversion*

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## 1. Introduction

Viewed as uncivilized savages and persistent obstacles to expansion efforts by their European colonizers, Indigenous North Americans and Africans were forced to assimilate into their colonizer's culture to become "productive assets." However, the consequences of assimilation for Indigenous peoples went well beyond the original intention. How did colonization specifically impact family life, central to Indigenous livelihood? This paper argues that colonization disrupted the strength of Indigenous family relationships by exacerbating parental stress and instability, fundamentally redefining their culture's family structure for future generations, and creating unnecessary division within the family.

## 2. Adding Parental Stress and Instability

Colonization fundamentally damaged relationships among family members by creating

heightened mental stress felt by parents, in addition to the removal and subsequent reteaching of Indigenous children. First, colonization placed undue stress and burden on fathers by altering their family roles in nontraditional ways and undermining their ability to showcase their masculinity. We can see this change in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. Prior to the arrival of white missionaries, the confidence of Igbo male leaders was comparatively higher. However, the presence of European missionaries provoked a feeling of emasculation in Igbo men due to the removal of their power by outside forces, resulting in increased domestic violence within families. Although some may argue that conflict is a natural element of family life, others argue that any level of domestic violence is mentally harmful to the victim and children, normalizing these behaviors and creates family insecurities, tensions, and immediate fear. When these colonial values contrast with the critical role mothers played within Indigenous families, parental identity and balance are

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sacrificed, and any semblance of stability may be compromised. For example, in *Things Fall Apart*:

*Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his obi, and he told them stories of the land-masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell... (Achebe, 2009)*

Like other colonized Indigenous people, Nwoye was conflicted as he needed to make the binary choice between his father and mother, masculinity and femininity, and expectations and desires, making it challenging to forge his own sense of identity, happiness, and independence. The repercussions of adhering to unfamiliar colonial expectations that conflict with prior life experiences can lead to parental mental health issues and substance abuse. These issues are supported by interviews with Indigenous women, who attribute these factors to historical experiences of oppression (Burnette, 2016, p. 364).

### 3. Redefining the Family Unit

Indigenous family structures were disrupted and redefined by colonization, causing foundational uncertainty regarding family member roles and responsibilities. Missionaries and colonizers imposed a model of what constitutes an acceptable family on cultures whose own model might differ wildly from the paternally headed nuclear family-oriented system seen in Europe. The “full reversal of the matrilineal and female-centered values that structured many [pre-colonial] indigenous communities” and subsequent increase in destructive behaviors by male partners created additional family responsibilities and ongoing stress for Indigenous women (Burnette, 2016, p. 365). Women were measured and judged by their ability to adhere to unfamiliar colonizer-centric standards regarding home keeping, family life, and morality. As noted by Dunstan et al. (2020), legal policies favoring this family model have “repeatedly called attention to the ‘gaps’ between the ideal family and Indigenous ways of doing family life and sought to disrupt and reshape Indigenous family life, mothering and caring for children towards ideals of

nuclear family structures and intensive parenting” (p. 339). Changing the underlying structure of the family unit to be more insular and self-contained opened the possibility of family members feeling alone, isolated, and unsupported. Although one could argue that a nuclear family creates benefits like “good citizenship and access to welfare” (Dunstan et al., 2020, p. 330), for some Indigenous cultures, a nuclear-style family unit shifted against historical concepts of Indigenous kinships and communities that support family well-being. Kinship is an essential support mechanism to address the needs of Indigenous families, often by providing help with child-rearing. For instance, another case study reveals that within Indigenous communities

*It was common and desirable for extended family members, especially grandparents, to take in and raise their kin... and therefore if an Indian woman did have a child that she could not care for, “there is often a willingness on the part of grandparents or other relatives to take the child.” (Jacobs, 2014)*

Kinship ties spread across an extended family network fosters a sense of community and enables broader support for children’s well-being and emotional needs by “encouraging a more multi-levelled idea of family that overlies nuclear relationships” (Dunstan et al., 2020, pp. 324-325).

### 4. Moving Children to Boarding Schools

Family structures and communities were further eroded when colonizers removed Indigenous children from their families and forced them to attend special boarding schools. These schools, which are now perceived as educational failures, existed across North America and had the primary goal of assimilating Indigenous students into Anglo culture by breaking their allegiance and closeness to their families, ancestry, heritage, and customs (Feir, 2016, p. 133). Many would argue that the permanence and continuity of stable family life provide a child with the support, encouragement, and mentorship that fosters learning and thriving in their activities and emotional and intellectual development. Children removed from their homes and subjected to new cultural and social norms must cope with massive

changes few can withstand, potentially resulting in low self-esteem, insecurity, and isolation. The colonial mindset behind Indigenous boarding schools can be seen in the character of Mr. Brown in *Things Fall Apart*, who “learned a good deal about the religion of the clan and he came to the conclusion that a frontal attack would not succeed. And so he built a school and a little hospital in Umuofia” (Achebe, 2009, p. 155). Like colonial governments in North America, Mr. Brown recognizes the difficulty of changing Indigenous behavior and beliefs and decides to build a school where he can indirectly affect cultural and religious change. Within a school environment, children learn academic skills and are also socialized to follow cultural rules, behaviors, and protocols. When these rules contrast with one’s family life or upbringing, this may cause confusion, inferiority, and inadequacy in the child. In 1926, the Institute for Government Research authorized a commission to survey the conditions of Indigenous people on nearly all reservations throughout the United States. The subsequent report, published in 1928, was highly critical of Indigenous boarding schools, deeming their provisions for the care of Indigenous children as “grossly inadequate” and noting that child removal “largely disintegrates the family and interferes with developing normal family life” (Jacobs, 2014, Prologue).

Some scholars argue the benefits of boarding school, claiming “residential schools generated a culturally-connected and educated elite that spent their careers fighting for Indigenous rights” (Feir, 2016, 435). Although it may be true that a small percentage of Indigenous students attending boarding school may have succeeded in this regard, one may also want to consider how the majority of Indigenous students fared. It should also be noted that the existence of boarding school alumni with positive experiences does not compensate for the overall detrimental effects these schools had on Indigenous children and their families. Ultimately, we must consider whether the benefits outweighed the costs in the long term.

## 5. Changing Core Beliefs

Colonization can also alter core belief systems

like religion and cultural practices, thereby creating a divide within the family and making it difficult for family members to maintain the conviction of their heritage, customs, and traditions. This division may have lasting implications for future generations. Children during the initial colonization might not gain enough cultural knowledge to teach their future children, resulting in a legacy of fractured and adulterated interpretations that deviate irreparably within and among families. With the support of colonial governments, Christian missionaries worked relentlessly to convert Indigenous people by preaching, building churches, and providing services and other benefits. Indigenous families and communities were further divided when members subscribed to differing religious beliefs. For example, from *Things Fall Apart*, Nwoye converts from his native religion, Chukwu, to Christianity, unlike the rest of his family. This change would presumably influence his cultural and heritage viewpoints and affect what religious and other core beliefs he and his future family would have. Nwoye’s spirituality following his conversion is profound:

*It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow... He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. (Achebe, 2009)*

Regardless of the sincerity of a conversion, when family members have deep yet divergent religious beliefs, everyday decisions and actions made by individual family members may create conflict within the family. This change has more significant implications when aggregated and applied at the community level. It may make it difficult for the community to have shared values and interests that bind and allow for positive progress. By introducing and encouraging a new religion alongside reinforcing governmental laws and rules, Indigenous parents and children may lose a level of familiarity and closeness. This loss is seen in *Things Fall Apart* when Okonkwo’s close friend Obierika notes

*Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia we should find it easy... But what of our own people*

*who are following their way and have been given power? They would go to Umuru and bring the soldiers, and we would be like Abame. (Achebe, 2009)*

Abame was a village destroyed by British colonizers and local collaborators following the murder of a white man, and Obierika fears the same fate will befall them if they try to drive out the colonizers in their own village.

## 6. Conclusion

The impacts colonization had on familial relationships and mental health were immediate and felt by future generations. By challenging Indigenous core belief systems, colonization confused and disrupted traditions regarding parental identity, parent-children intimacy and separation, divergent core beliefs. It may have instigated a fundamental redefinition of what was considered a sufficient family unit structure. It appears that only through decolonization and reconciliation can Indigenous peoples reverse some of these negative consequences. Indigenous people can potentially reclaim their cultural and psychological freedoms through decolonization to obtain their sovereignty, like self-manage their land, culture, customs, and political systems. It seems that it ought to be the responsibility of colonizer governments to allow Indigenous people to reclaim what they have lost so that their cultures don't disappear, and family relationships and structures are strengthened, taking full responsibility for these challenges and repercussions. Will they allow for the decolonization of and provide support to Indigenous peoples and future generations so that healing can occur? Perhaps as a first step, colonizing governments can return Indigenous lands so that Indigenous families can return and live with complete autonomy. Further exploration is recommended on the practical steps of decolonization, what programs would best support these steps, and what additional factors ought to be considered for each Indigenous group.

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