

# A Road to Cultural Imperialism: An Examination of Winch's Language Games

Written by Cosanna Preston

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In his essay, "Understanding a Primitive Society" Peter Winch claims that cultures are enclosed in language games which are both mutually unintelligible and equally valid. In doing so he is trying to prevent anthropologists from concluding that a culture is 'wrong' about reality (i.e. their belief system and how that informs their daily life) (Winch 79). Winch sees such judgement as an open door to cultural imperialism; if a culture is wrong than it stands to be corrected by the culture which judges it as such. He has every reason for such a noble pursuit. Writing in the time of African decolonization, he had born witness to the colonialists' domination of innumerable cultures. Justified out of a 'need' to civilize the inferior savages and support the superior Europeans (through slaves and natural resources) this unequal cultural relationship allowed for utter destruction on the continent.

Winch's conception of reality, or more properly, realities, has since become the cornerstone of most anthropological work, which seeks to understand and explain the foreign cultural contexts while imbuing them with an inherent validity. Unfortunately, it also informs our current global cultural coexistence of invasion and domination as he has stripped all cultures of any responsibility to look outside their own reality, as such a task, he says, is impossible. The result is not an absolute state of relativism where every one culture is valued equally by all others. For if this was the case than we would be incapacitated by the world's contradicting and conflicting value systems. Rather, values win out over others, not necessarily because they are right but because they are stronger. For this reason I must argue that in our world where conflict and contradiction of values exists Winch allows for the very cultural imperialism he is seeking to correct. To illustrate this argument I will first explore the basics of Winch's article and then move into an examination of the relationship between the Ogoni people of the Niger Delta, Nigeria and the Nigerian government, as supported by the oil companies operating in the region.

Winch begins his article by stating that an anthropologist conducts his studies of people's beliefs and practises "to make those beliefs and practices intelligible to himself and his readers. This means presenting an

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account of them that will somehow satisfy the criteria of rationality demanded by the culture to which he and his readers belong" (78). However, Winch criticises the contemporary anthropological approach arguing that the language game in which the anthropologist operates, and through which he analyses the other culture, precludes him from properly understanding the other culture from within. Accordingly he suggests that the anthropologist's language game is "deeply affected by the achievements and methods of the sciences, and one which treats such things as a belief in magic...as almost a paradigm of the irrational" (79). Thus arises the notion of mutually exclusive language games; incapable of making the culture intelligible in the anthropologist's language game, he dismisses it as irrational.

Let us prod these notions of irrationality and mutual exclusivity. Consider the following set of statements: *All employees earn money. Money allows us to buy things. Things are needed for our sustenance. Therefore we should all make as much money as possible.* The first three sentences are true. However, the fourth sentence can only be true if we first have an idea that we *ought* to be accumulating as much as possible to ensure our sustenance is always provided for. If we operate in a language game such as one followed by the Ogoni people this sentence would be altered as such: *All employees earn money. Money allows us to buy things. Things are needed for sustenance. Therefore we should work only when we need to acquire something.* Here again the last statement, though it may appear to be a jump in logic, implies the Ogoni conception of reality that subsistence-based living is the right way to live; a stark contrast to the accumulation-based living model in the Western European culture.

Any one person within either of these exemplified language games who has not attempted to look outside their language game will see their conclusion of either accumulation or subsistence as *the* reality and the other as illogical and/or wrong. Winch regards this dismissal as an inability to understand another culture and concludes that each culture must possess its own individual reality. Yet, if that were true, then if I valued something fervently enough it would become a reality. What's more where does a language game begin and end? What of sub-cultures and generational gaps? Do these form their own language games? If so how are they subsumed under a larger cultural language game if language games are mutually unintelligible? As I will examine shortly, this simply cannot be the case. There must be a super language game, a reality external to the conceptualized realities that exist in each culture, in each person. What members of language games have done is manipulate (consciously or not) this super game reality to suit their values, their language game rules.

What I am implicitly suggesting therefore is that *the* reality exists through some ranking of the values which persist in the world's language games. This ranking would then form the rules of the super game which can be seen to define the 'good life'. In stating the 'good life' and 'super game' I do not necessarily mean one set of rules that

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applies to all people so that we are forced to homogenize and operate as one culture but rather a ranked set of values that allows all people to ascertain the *same* level of goodness likely through varying cultural manifestations as limited by the super games ranked values.

As a further caveat I must clarify that this ranking would be based out of a value-informed super game as opposed to a historically-informed super game. That is to say, 'the good life' super game would be constructed on the basis of the best understanding of how the world operates and how to best encompass the innumerable language games as opposed to a super game based on which set of values was able to win out over the rest (historical). The difference of course is that the latter is the dominance of one language game over the rest while the former super game supersedes the existing language games and may or may not encompass their enduring values. Now, certainly the defining of such a grand proposition is beyond the purview of this essay but it is important to begin to understand the parameters and implications of the super game, whatever that might be, in order for us to move forward in this analysis.

With this in mind we can return to our analysis of Winch. In order to support his notion of multiple realities he uses the example of the Zande oracle, suggesting that the oracle has the *real* possibility to dictate human future action. The most acute concern is of course, contradiction, what happens when the sequence of events differs from the Oracle's tellings? Some explanation include: the oracle itself may be tainted, the question was asked in a confused manner, or a person within the ceremonial proceedings is using witchcraft to taint the outcome (88).

His argument weakens when he questions the very validity of witchcraft and its genetic-inheritance as a way of again, explaining away contradiction. He cites Evans-Pritchard (an anthropologist who studied the Zande) in describing that witchcraft-substance can be found through a post-mortem in the intestines. Evans-Pritchard's concern is that if this substance was found in someone it would prove the family was a witch family but if it was then *not* found within the same family, the original findings would be contradicted as either the entire family is of witches or none, according to the Zande (91-92). In raising this example of contradiction Winch notes, "It might appear as though we had clear grounds for speaking of the superior rationality of European over Zande thought, in so far as the latter involves a contradiction which it makes no attempt to remove and does not even recognize: one, however, which is recognizable as such in the context of European thinking" (92). The comment serves Winch's argument that no one language game is superior and he goes on to note that the two contexts are simply incompatible, mutually unintelligible (93).

It is here where Winch's argument dives too deeply into cultural relativism and loses sight of his aims to

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obliterate cultural imperialism. In settling on mutually unintelligibility and failing to offer a grander point of reference (the super game) he facilitates cultural domination through might rather than justice i.e. the historically-informed super game instead of the value-ranked super game. What Winch is missing in his analysis is not that the realities are different—indeed a rock, is a rock is a rock: if you throw it, it will fall—but that each language game *conceptualizes* reality based on its own ranking of values, which necessarily leads to different understandings of the workings of the world. Whether it be 'right' or 'wrong' according to the external reality is rarely considered and is at most secondary to ascertaining the good life as they see it. However, Winch does not make this distinction. Rather he suggests that their conceptualized realities *are* realities. Thus there are multiple realities.[\*]

The implication of reality as philosophised in this manner implies that, if reality is relative, then if you believe something hard enough it will become true. If you create a complex enough reality for yourself it will become real, even if it stems from merely pen and paper and a severe excess of time. Now there is no question that such a reality could be believable. Indeed schizophrenics often live such an existence of utter belief in a reality that does not exist but eventually, if *the* reality pushes hard enough on the language game walls one will be forced to alter their beliefs to suit reality. If people believe water flows up and are confronted with the reality that water flows down they will find themselves adjusting their previous convictions to suit the reality presented. Furthermore, Winch seems to fail to see his own contradiction. If all people are trapped in their own language games, how is he able to escape his own language game and engage in this critical analysis of Evans-Pritchard as well as the Zande?

To this end I think we can sufficiently see that reality cannot possibly be relative, that there is a reality external to our cultural understandings and values. However, we need to understand the implication of Winch's cultural relativism and why it is absolutely necessary for the sake of the good life of the very people Winch is trying to protect, that we do not adhere to his analysis of reality(ies). To do this we must look at what happens when cultures collide. Indeed it is all well and good to preach absolutely relative and thereby absolute tolerance of all cultures when they exist independently but what happens when they have to coexist, as is occurring more and more each day in this world. In his article Winch suggested that the European science-imbued framework cannot analyze or judge the Zande tribe due to its inability to see from within the culture. While perhaps they shouldn't judge, cultures do this to one another all the time. Such judgement is particularly daunting when one culture retains power over the other. Indeed, it is here that we will see the detrimental implication of Winch's argument. To do so we will examine the specific case informed by the context of the nation-state. The group we will examine are the Ogoni people of the Niger Delta, Nigeria to understand what happens when marginalized, minority communities come in contact with the majority language game, the government-industry behemoth, which wishes to develop the surrounding land for oil extraction.

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I would like to remind the reader that I do not purport to be an insider with regards to either language game which I will explain, nor do I purport the nation-state concept to be free of a language game. Thus my explanations are certainly not objective but necessarily influenced by my own language game. However, I have tried to the best of my ability to look outside my own language game and grasp at the greater reality of the situation. Implied in this explanation are also values that could be included in the super game, as well as some which could be excluded. Furthermore, this entire process is of course limited by my limited time for reflection on the issue thus far in my life and my necessary trapping in my own cave that I have yet to overcome. This may prevent me from being able to see the inherent damage that may be caused by any value order I imply in this paper but one has to start somewhere and so here is where I start to structure the super game.

Let us begin with a brief history of the language games in question, those being the Ogoni, which could be broadly generalized as retaining subsistence and communitarian values bound up in the idea that the ultimate good life can only be given by nature, and the Nigerian government/oil industry partnership[†], which values accumulation and the individual and is bound up in the idea that the ultimate good life can be produced and bought, thus they don't need to rely on the offerings of nature but rather it is an object for manipulation.

The Ogoni people, a community of roughly 500,000 located in the southern tip of the Niger Delta are an extreme minority in the country. Incorporated into Nigeria without consultation, the group has fought long and hard to protect its way of life, its language game. Their language game is comprised of a communitarian, subsistence life approach which is centred on a very spiritual conception of the land. This is based in the Ogoni's dependence on it as the direct provider of survival (food, medicine, shelter, clothing etc). A particular example that helps us understand the land as the essence of the Ogoni language game is offered by now deceased Ken Saro-Wiwa, a former leader and activist within the Ogoni community. In an attempt to limit misinterpretation I will quote him at length:

[The land and rivers] not only provided sustenance in abundance, they were also a spiritual inheritance. The land is a god and is worshipped as such. The fruit of the land, particularly yams, are honoured in festivals and, indeed, the Annual Festival of the Ogoni is held at the yam harvest. The planting season is not a mere period of agricultural activity: it is a spiritual, religious and social occasion. 'Tradition' in Ogoni means in the local tongue (*doonu kuneke*) the honouring of the land (earth, soil, water). This respect for the land means that forests are not merely a collection of trees and the abode of animals but also, and more intrinsically, a sacred possession. Trees in the forest cannot therefore be cut indiscriminately without regard for their sacrosanctity and their influence on the well-being of the entire community, of the land.

Moreover, the Ogoni believe that the soul of a man or woman has the power to leave its human form and enter in to that of a beast, taking on the shape of an animal.... 'nearly all *strong* animals in the bust, such as tiger[sic], elephants, antelope, tortoise, and such aquatic animals as crocodiles, turtles and catfish are credited with being *were* beasts. It is common believe that should any harm come to a *were* beast, it would also affect its human counterpart.'

To the Ogoni, rivers and streams do not only provide water for life – for bathing and drinking etc; they do not

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only provide fish for food, they are also sacred and are bound up intricately with the life of the community, of the entire Ogoni nation. (Saro-Wiwa 12)

It is this conception that ties the Ogoni acutely to the land as their life source and informs their subsistence lifestyle, one where they only take what they need. If something is not needed for subsistence then one does not need to take it. To do so would be exploitation, risking a dishonouring of their God, the land; the harm of the unjustified harm of their community members through unnecessarily through the killing of *were* beasts and inevitably the destruction of their very mode of physical survival.

Thus we begin to see the insulation of a language game as Winch illustrates with the example of the Zande unwilling to push to the contradiction phase of witchcraft. For the Ogoni, the 'were'beasts embody the same sort of mysticism. Ultimately, there would be a contradiction, if for example all the beasts were killed and the Ogoni didn't die as a result. The proceeding starvation that would naturally follow with no game left to hunt may resolve that contradiction for the Ogoni, but reality suggests the two are linked because there is no food to eat not because the death of a spirit in an animal resulted in the death of a human. At the very least the Ogoni do not see this distinction as they recognise that "one's life is subject to contingencies rather than an attempt to control these" (104-105). The perceived negative outcomes such as human harm through the exploitation of 'were' beasts reinforces their value system and discourages the Ogoni from looking outside the explanation built into their language game. That said, my own explanation of the system could be missing another aspect of reality at play that my conception prevents me from seeing.

However, assuming my explanation to be correct, as endless caveats will paralyze us, these differing conceptions of land is the starkest contrast between the Ogoni and the government-industry language games. While the Ogoni live their lives willingly subject to contingencies, the government-industry attempts to control for these contingencies in their life as much as possible. Thus, while the land is the central component of the Ogoni language game it is merely an object to be exploited in the view of the government-industry: an indirect source of survival which is intervened by the monetary exchange. For this language game, it is the control of capital that is the essence. The control of capital allows one to obtain (through purchase) life's necessities and provides access to life's decadence. This decadence is legitimated because it is assumed that it only occurs after one's basic needs are accounted for and there is little articulate ground to effectively counter growing accumulation which does not result in overly broad generalization or contradiction. Indeed, who decides when one's basic needs have been satisfied and when it becomes sheer accumulation? A super game would be able to answer this question though it may be with a solution that has nothing to do with accumulation. What's more, the Nigerian-industry language game is supported by many similarly-conceived and politically powerful language games around the world. Thus, as it stands, it is this bulwark

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that makes the capitalistic language game so pervasive with the vast majority of cultures with which it comes into contact.

In stark contrast to the central values of the Ogoni language game, capitalism promotes the rise of the individual through material accumulation. As such land is viewed as something to be manipulated and conquered, not revered and respected.[‡] It is almost entirely devoid of any spiritual connection and is seen as something which is to be worked and used. Any damage that is done to the land is thus often dismissed as necessary for the end production of as much capital as possible; the crude essence of this language game. What desired need exists amongst the Nigerian government to mitigate damage, as has been the trend as of late, is due to a recognized need to execute some semblance of a preservation strategy for future use. The mindset remains however to reap and fix, not sustain from the beginning. Indeed, it is fixing, reactionary, because it is viewed as temporary, a temporary fix until further able to manipulate the language game's place in relation to nature.

Thus the key difference between these two language games is two fold. Firstly, for the Ogoni, the land is central to their language game. For the Nigerian government-industry partnership, the notion of capital accumulation is central. It follows then that the latter is more concerned with the well-being of the individual, theorizing that the group's well-being will arise out of its healthy parts (the individuals). For the Ogoni however it is the reverse; the community is the concern while the individual's well-being is acquired through group health.

What we can elicit to assist in the remainder of this paper is that the definitions of the good life in each language game are inherently different and, as we will see, are in fact competing. The question then becomes, what happens when these two cultures come into contact? What are the implications of Winch's cultural relativism on this meeting? In considering these two significantly opposing language games there are two critical factors: the political dominance and sheer physical might the government-industry retains over the Ogoni and its inherent complexities and decadence which suck outsiders into its folds. The Ogoni have virtually nothing with which to protect themselves and any like-minded language games which may exist as support suffer the same overwhelmed status in Nigeria.

As such, despite the argument of this essay that there is one overarching reality, a super game, there is most certainly merit to Winch's argument for multiple realities. Indeed in informing anthropological study and cultural sensitivity it can be seen as steps in a quest to discover *the* reality. Unfortunately, Winch goes too far in one sense and not far enough in another: too far with his insistence on cultural relativism and not far enough in attempting to learn from the language games which he rightly identifies, encloses each culture. This insistence on relativism and deterrence from cultural judgement, as we are beginning to see with the Ogoni/Nigerian government example, in fact

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negates Winch's attempt to obliterate cultural imperialism.

Rather it facilitates it, not because Winch explicitly sanctions cultural imperialism, but because there is no sanction on anything. No value judgements are made nor can be made in the Winch-ian view, everything is allowed and nothing is prohibited so long as it can be justified within a language game. Doing so would elevate one language game over the other and contradict his construct of multiple, equally relevant realities. Taken to an extreme Winch's theory of absolute relativism not only absolves humanity of all action. For how can an action be judged if it can be justified through a language game? But it also implies that humans would be incapable of understanding one another for we are all informed by slight different language games as informed by our upbringing, our societal surroundings and our life experiences. The result could be entire alienation from one another.

On a less extreme note however this cultural relativism facilitates what has happened between the Ogoni and the Nigerian government, cultural domination through might and cultural tenacity. As a synopsis, the government and oil industry wanted Ogoni land for oil extraction. The Ogoni people resisted citing the whole scale threat such extraction would pose to the Ogoni culture (language game). These concerns were initially classified as environmental by the government and it was only after the Ogoni recognized that they must fight their battle from *within* the language game of the Nigerian government, that they were able to achieve some semblance of success. However, this success only occurred because the Ogoni were able to enter the Nigerian language game in an appeal to their values—protecting the land for future capital consumption. It had nothing to do with recognition on the part of the Nigerian government-industry of the Ogoni's core values. This distinction is critical for it negates Winch's theory that an individual can insert themselves into a foreign language game.

The initial response by the government and oil companies was a whole scale disregard for the Ogoni demands coupled with rapid industrialization of the area for oil extraction. The result was extreme degradation of the natural environment causing immense upheaval and destruction within the Ogoni's language game. To this day the Ogoni live a life of absolute destitution and limbo. They are disenfranchised from their own language game as a result of the destruction of everything that informed it and are unwilling to shift to the industrial-government language game (not that this is even a possibility according to Winch). What's more, even if they were willing to shift over to the Nigerian government-industry language game as has been the case for some individual Ogonis from time to time, the Nigerian political structure with all of its faults subjugates minorities, particularly those in resource-rich areas. Thus, so long as the Nigerian government-industry language game remains in complete control, the Ogoni are doomed to an impoverished existence.



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This result is entirely bound up in the teachings of Winch-ian cultural relativism. Absolved of trying to understand one another since that is impossible according to Winch, the two have for the most part operated past each other, from separate contexts which are simply incapable of cross-intelligibility (93). For the Ogoni this means demanding that the government and industry abandon their modes of operation in order to protect the Ogoni language game in its entirety. The blip in this stance, the environmentalization of their argument, was certainly not caused by any attempt to equally value the government-industry reality but rather recognition of the power battle at play, as is made clear by succumbing to the language game of the Nigerian government.

Conversely, the Nigerian government, considering they maintain the balance of power, are able to largely ignore Ogoni demands. Any concessions to the Ogoni are done on the governments' terms and thus while potentially addressing surface level issues, such as forest protection or the reduced release of toxic gases take place only because their balance of power or access to capital (oil) is somewhat threatened by Ogoni pressure. The result, up until the last decade, was an utter trouncing of the Ogoni language game in favour of the Nigerian government's language game. This is a natural course of action considering the individuals of this language game are not pressured to see outside their own conception of reality and recognize that it may be flawed in some instances and by the same token, that the Ogoni language game may retain value necessarily worth preserving.

Casualties of this course of action in the case of the Ogoni are unfortunate by-products in the name of progress and the capitalist ideal. Even literal casualties can be explained away. This is not to say that all death and killing is justified or tolerated by the Nigerian government-industry. Much like in our own society, murder is condemned. The deaths discussed in this paper are simply not considered murders as such but necessary actions by the state. In the case of the numerous protestors who have died at the hands of oil company security and government forces, the standard line is that the deaths are unfortunate events but necessary if the oil industry is to be protected. Considering Nigeria depends on the oil industry as the life blood of its economy this protection is crucial.

If however the two groups were forced to interact in consideration of a super game the outcome would be intensely different. This is not to say that the roles would be entirely reversed or that the Ogoni's demands would all be met but the process in deciding which values were adhered to from both the Ogoni and the government-industry would be completely different. We can see the infant makings of a super game in the fallout of the initial Ogoni-Nigerian government struggle.

As the cultural pressure exerted by the Nigerian government intensified with the oil production in the Ogoni region, Ogonis one by one began to buy into this other language game. The abandonment of the Ogoni culture for the

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Nigerian post-colonial culture was staunchly criticized by Ogoni purists. After a complex sequence of events, the reality of which remains incredibly unclear, four allegedly government-aligned chiefs were murdered (that is the deaths were condemned by the Nigerian government-industry), prominent Ogoni activists were tried and hanged and outrage set in throughout the international community, rich with accusations of a mistrial.[§] It is this outrage which has begun to force the Nigerian government-industry outside of its language game in a bending to international pressures at least superficially. The international groups are seemingly attempting to embed Winch's concept of cultural relativism into a context of value ranking. This international value-ranking is certainly nothing new. The United Nations has done this with the declaration of Human Rights and other cross-cultural, humanitarian rules it has tried and continues to establish. Indeed, the UN is creating a framework from which we can critique existing cultures. Such a framework now allows us to state that profit at any cost (including life) is not acceptable for the good life.

The problem of course with the United Nations' promotion of a super game is of course the serious critique that the organization itself is tainted by the hegemonic language games which make up the organization, most specifically the United States, and thus in its pursuit of the global good life, does not draw enough upon non-Western ideals. One may retort that those who complain in such a manner simply do not want to look outside their own language games as this risks recognizing the fallacies in their own value rankings. However, it also poses the question, how do we know when any organization or any individual for that matter has escaped their own language game to such an extent that their suggested ranking of values can begin to build the super game? Certainly at this point such an emergence from one's cave does not seem likely but there is a significant difference between improbability and impossibility. If a super game doesn't exist, than the ranking is impossible. However, if it does, as this essay has taken great pains to suggest, than it's recognition is possible and merely improbable at this point in time; a difficult feat to achieve no doubt and one for which surmounting I have few suggestions but it is indeed possible.

Thus we need Winch's approach to be able to first see all the diverging values that exist within the innumerable language games in order to begin to understand what values are available to us in forming the super game but we cannot stop at this identification as Winch suggests. Rather we must plunge forward into the ranking process in order to prevent the dominance which we have seen by the government-industry over the Ogoni and which continues to occur around the world.

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[\*] As a student primarily of International Relations I feel it necessary to mention at this point that we cannot dismiss others' realities as simply conceptions. Rather in working through cross-cultural issues we must be wary that we all stem from different conceptions of reality. At this point, be they right or wrong according to the undefined super game is irrelevant as it is the only reality known to that said group. Thus to in communication to achieve cooperation or cohabitation, the dialogue must be considerate of all conceptualized realities as valid realities. However, that does not mean that the final solution must embrace everything from each reality. Indeed, in most cases this would pose significant contradictions.

[†] I recognize that industry and government actually maintain exclusive language games and of course sub-language games but for the purposes of this analysis we can look at the umbrella language games (that informed by the neo-liberal/capitalist mode) which combines the two games.

[‡] Those contingencies which this language game is unable to control for are called 'natural disasters' the term thus giving credence to some remnants of nature serving at the basis of reality. They operate as a jarring reminder that not even this all-dominating language game can control for absolutely every contingency.

[§] The ability for an international community to judge the Nigerian verdict of justice based on international law brings in a whole other layer of complexity with regards to intelligibility of language games, which we are not able to address in this paper.

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*Written by: Cosanna Preston  
Written at: University of Alberta  
Written for: Dr Heidi Studer  
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