

CULTURAL DISSENSIONS AND THE TEMPORALITY OF COLONIALISM IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD*

*Prashant Hiremath**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19500499>

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the intricate web of cultural dissensions in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964). Moving beyond a binary view of "colonizer vs. colonized," this study examines the novel as a depiction of a society produced in an "interregnum"-a rupture in time where the past is no longer accessible and the future remains indeterminate. The research explores the semiotics of Igbo culture within the specific setting of Umuaro, a society in transition where traditional customs and foreign European influences clash. By analyzing the internal power struggles of Umuaro alongside the external pressures of British administration, this study highlights how ideological rigidity and the pragmatism of survival led to the eventual collapse of the traditional Igbo social order. Central to this analysis is the character of Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu, whose personal ambition and "fatal inflexibility" create a scission within his community. While the British administration sought to impose political authority by misinterpreting traditional structures, the internal division between Ezeulu and his rivals further "trampled" the culture, rendering it vulnerable to colonial displacement. Ultimately, the research argues that the shift toward Christianity was a pragmatic response to the threat of famine and social disintegration, signaling the "song of extermination" for traditional Africa and the birth of a new colonial order. This study utilizes a

* **Prashant Hiremath**, Lecturer, Department of English, Shri G.R.G. Arts, Shri Y.A.P. Commerce & Shri M.P.D. Science Degree College, Indi.

qualitative framework to examine how meaning is produced and contested, illustrating that the downfall of traditional society was a result of both external interference and internal rigidity.

KEYWORDS: Arrow of God, Colonialism, Igbo Culture, Cultural Dissension, Postcolonial Interregnum.

Introduction:

The Postcolonial Interregnum Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God serves as a profound literary exploration of the cultural disruption and identity crises that occurred in 1920s Nigeria. Unlike his earlier work, Things Fall Apart, which depicts the initial shock of contact, Arrow of God is preoccupied with a "belated colonialism". The novel is set in Umuaro, a particular place that establishes the semiotics of Igbo culture while signaling the difficulties Africans encounter in translating the time of decolonization. It portrays a society in transition, where traditional customs and foreign European influences clash, leading to the eventual collapse of a long-standing cultural order.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.1 Qualitative Literary Analysis

This study utilizes a qualitative framework to examine the intersection of power, history, and social structures. While some preliminary frameworks for this research suggested a quantitative approach, the depth of literary dissension necessitates a hermeneutic analysis of the text.

2.2 Culture and Ideology

In the study of culture, the concept of ideology is a vital element; ideologies work to reproduce or sustain the relations between the dominant and the subservient. The research utilizes Antonio Gramsci's theories of cultural hegemony and Frantz Fanon's observations on colonial displacement to understand how the British administration successfully established central authority by removing the natives' capacity to resist.

3. The Symbiosis of Literature and Culture

The relationship between literature and culture is inseparable, similar to that of a dance and a dancer. Literature is a sensitive record

of what authors have seen, experienced, and felt; it holds a mirror to life and discloses the true ideals of a civilization.

Cultural Transmission: Literature discloses and transmits concepts across generations, allowing children and adults to understand the history that shaped their home.

Reflecting the Zeitgeist: Literature reflects the “spirit of the age” and is considered a product of its time, capturing the contemporary processes of class struggle and conflict.

Bilateral Influence: Culture establishes the situation in which writers flourish, while literature opens new approaches toward the world, helping to establish new thoughts within cultural components.

4. Internal Dissensions: The Fall of the Chief Priest

The tragedy of Umuaro is not solely the result of external interference but is rooted in internal division. While the society of Umuofia was more collective, Umuaro is fundamentally divided, allowing individuals like Ezeulu to gain disproportionate influence.

4.1 The Paradox of the “Arrow of God”

The title refers to an Igbo proverb suggesting a person represents God’s will. Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of the god Ulu, views himself as a divine tool. However, he often blurs the line between his deity’s instructions and his personal desire for power and control over the people. His major decisions-refusing war, sending his son to a missionary school, and rejecting British authority-frequently stem from a desire to dominate rather than serve.

4.2 Fatal Inflexibility and Revenge

The turning point of the narrative occurs when Ezeulu’s advice is ignored during the conflict with Okperi, leading to deep resentment toward his own people. His subsequent imprisonment by the British provides an opportunity for revenge. By refusing to call the New Yam Festival, he disrupts the agricultural cycle. This act of “fatal inflexibility” forces the community into a pragmatic crisis: they must choose between starvation or turning to the Christian church for protection.

5. External Pressures: The Colonial Machine

The British administration, represented by officers such as Winterbottom and Clarke, misunderstands and misuses traditional

structures to impose political authority.

Institutional Displacement: The British used education to reorient the youth, effectively removing the traditional capacity to resist.

Misinterpretation: The colonial government viewed African systems through a lens of negativity or partial respect that nonetheless supported total control.

6. The “Song of Extermination” and Cultural Collapse

The novel concludes with a “song of extermination”-the sound of the school bell calling children away from traditional agriculture toward Western education. This transition was a gradual replacement rather than a sudden death. The internal power struggles between Ezeulu and his rivals “trampled” the culture to pieces, allowing Christianity to “take the spoils” of a fractured society.

7. Conclusion

Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* serves as a profound testament to the complexity of African civilizations prior to and during the colonial encounter. Achebe highlights that African culture possessed immense depth, dignity, and a sophisticated internal logic. However, the novel functions as a balanced critique, refusing to romanticize the past by critically examining the internal weaknesses and structural fractures that made the society vulnerable to external interference. The eventual collapse of the traditional Igbo social order in Umuaro was not the result of a single force but rather a “bilateral failure”. It was catalyzed by the relentless external pressure of British colonial displacement, which systematically dismantled indigenous authority through administrative restructuring and the introduction of Western education. Simultaneously, this external pressure was exacerbated by the internal rigidity and pride of traditional leadership. Ezeulu’s refusal to compromise-driven by a personal agenda of revenge-disrupted the sacred agricultural cycle and placed his people in an impossible position.

Faced with the existential threat of famine and the perceived abandonment by their Chief Priest, the villagers’ turn toward Christianity represented a pragmatic shift for survival rather than a mere spiritual conversion. This mass movement symbolized the

“song of extermination” for the old way of life. Ultimately, the fractured bonds of the community allowed the colonial order to “take the spoils,” signaling the definitive end of an indigenous era and the birth of a new, hybridized colonial reality. The tragedy of Ezeulu thus mirrors the larger tragedy of a culture “trampled to pieces” by the twin forces of foreign imposition and internal discord.

References:

1. Achebe, C. (1964). *Arrow of God*. Heinemann.
2. Achebe, C. (1988). *Hopes and impediments: Selected essays*. Doubleday.
3. Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-music-text*. Fontana Press.
4. Fanon, F. (2004). *The wretched of the earth*. Grove Press.
5. Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. International Publishers.
6. Ojinmah, U. (2004). The man behind the priest. In E. N. Emenyonu (Ed.), *Emerging perspectives on Chinua Achebe: Vol. 1. Omenka: The master artist* (pp. 207–216). Africa World Press.