

## CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN *ARROW OF GOD*: A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*The concept of "African identity" is intricate and multidimensional, encompassing a wide variety of African cultures, ethnicities, languages, histories, and experiences. Language pertains to an important aspect of culture. With almost 2,000 different languages spoken there, Africa has enormous linguistic diversity. Multilingual Africans frequently speak multiple languages within their communities. The paper intends to examine the intricacies of cultural identity in lieu of the conflict faced by the Igbo community in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* in the light of the most dominant community of Africa, Igbo. The importance of culture and tradition in a society like Igbo played a crucial role in forming the identity of the African people with which they related to the most and became the main reason for their retaliation against the colonizers. The study garners an eclectically approach which further relates to the concept of colonialism in the realm of African society and culture as portrayed in *Arrow of God*.*

**Keywords:** African Identity, Culture, Linguistic Diversity, Igbo Society, Colonialism.

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### Introduction

National culture is the collective thought process of a people to describe, justify, and extol the actions whereby they have joined forces and remained strong. National culture in the underdeveloped countries, therefore, must lie at the very heart of the liberation struggle these countries are waging.

-(Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961:168)

The culture and traditions of a place entail its significance and identity in the life the people residing there by following and accepting it. Cultural identity constitutes the basic personality of an individual that plays a significant role in shaping his interests and dislikes in the future and the way he perceives himself in a scenario where he's supposed to compete against others and their perception of themselves. A political and cultural novel, *The Arrow of God* (1964) is set in early 20th-century Nigeria. It tells the tale of Ulu's head priest, Ezeulu, to examine the points where Igbo customs and European Christianity converge. In this book, different cultures come face to face. Achebe depicts the colonialists' disruptive influence on the Igbo society, which fragments from within and turns back toward Christianity.

As Pramod K Nayar in his book *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* quoted, "The term postcolonial signifies a transformed historical situation and the cultural transformations that have arisen in

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response to changed political circumstances, in the former colonial power. To make it more clear, it describes a completely new experience of political freedom, new ideologies and new agendas.” (65) One of the African writers who helped draw attention to the issues facing Africans and the diversity of African culture is Chinua Achebe. Nonetheless, the psychological decolonization of Africa remains unfulfilled, with the traumatizing consequences of colonization continuing to linger over the continent's populace. Therefore, for the people of Africa, making peace with their past, present, and civilization is essential to reclaiming their identity. He demands the removal of the complexes brought up by years of self-loathing and self-deprecation. However, this shouldn't lead to an absurd idealization of African history as a Garden of Eden. Achebe depicts the clashing of two civilizations in his book *Arrow of God*. Achebe aimed to illustrate how an internally imposed power structure is disrupted by an externally imposed power system. The combination of internal conflicts and the aftermath of external invasion leads to tragedy for the Igbo society. As a result, it breaks down internally and turns back toward Christianity. This reorientation leads to the assimilation of Western values and beliefs and eventually the Igbo identity is lost. The erosion of African identity at the sociocultural, religious, and political levels will be highlighted in the paper. When colonial invasions began, African identity was in jeopardy. African people's lives are inauthentic because of their altered and blended identities. In a broad sense, the original and unstructured life of Africans was severely harmed by the religious, social, cultural, and political ramifications of civilizing Africa, as did the life of every individual living in the colonies. The local people's history, religion, society, culture, and other aspects were all defined under the Western-imported, linear, exclusive, and absolutistic framework. Native American ideologies and cultural practices were despised and many of them have vanished without being able to resist the overwhelming intervention of the enormous powers of colonization. The book emphasizes how crucial cultural identity is to maintaining Igbo traditions, beliefs, and practices. The main character, Ezeulu, is a defender of tradition and the high priest of Ulu, the village deity. His devotion to customs represents the Igbo identity's tenacity in the face of outside influences. Igbo traditions and beliefs were directly undermined by British colonialism, which replaces them with Western morality and religion. Igbo identity is undermined by this cultural pressure, leaving the community vulnerable and bewildered. The introduction of Christianity undermined the foundational beliefs of the Igbo people, leading to a decline in faith and a break with their ancestors' spirits. The identity dilemma is exacerbated by this spiritual deterioration. All things considered, Achebe's examination of cultural identity in *Arrow of God* is complex and varied. Instead of just showing a straight-line loss of culture, he illustrates the community's many resistances, adaptations, and struggles against colonialism. The book is still relevant today making us consider the challenges of maintaining cultural identity in an increasingly interconnected world. Shakti Batra in his book *Chinua Achebe: Arrow of God, A Critical Study* articulates “The novel, *Arrow of God* of Achebe has been really a success in its exploration of Igbo culture. Like the novels *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, this novel also explores the intersections of Igbo tradition and European Christianity. The novel is set in the village of Umuaro at the beginning of the twentieth century. Almost in the lines of the main characters in the preceding novels, *Okonkwo* in *Things Fall Apart* and *Obi* in *No Longer at Ease*, the story of Ezeulu the central character unveils ultimately leading to his tragic end (9).

As quoted by Achebe in his book *Arrow of God* “When they were compelled to work for the road, which Mr. Wright was building to connect Okperi with Umuaro, people at the villages became restless, as they had to work without payment. And in the gathering that followed their dissatisfaction, Moses Unachukwu, one of the first converts to Christianity, speaks about the total infiltration of western ideals with feelings of submission and helplessness. He tells the native people that: “...and I can tell you that there is no escape from the white man. He has come. When suffering knocks at your door and you say there is no seat left for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool. The white man is like that” (84) Here Unachukwu accepts the advent of white man and his intrusion in a mood of helplessness. He is not ready to act against or resist rather he is submissive and takes it for granted that there is no way outside and no escape. He continues that, “as daylight chases away darkness so will the white man drive away all our customs” (84). Here, he unintentionally concedes that their local origins' habits and practices are dark and must be driven out by the "light" that white people provide. Moses Unachukwu's opinions already contain an acquiescence to the colonial powers. In addition, he interprets the gloomy aspects of his own indigenous culture. The colonists' instruction and encouragement instill in the native population a sense of unconscious inferiority. Achebe introduces white civilization in all of its manifestations and structures through Unachukwu's words. Unachukwu warned the villagers when the conversation about forced labor without compensation continued and the majority of them were upset at his defense and fear of the supremacy of white people with the words “...The wither man, the new,

religion, the soldiers, the new road—they all are part of the same thing, the white man has a gun, a machet, a bow and carries fire in his mouth. He does not fight with one weapon alone” (85). The education they provided the aboriginal people frequently caused "white mental images" to form in the minds of those who attended. They were thus given an ideal, which is at odds with their own customs, and they ought to strive for and adhere to it. Thus, we witness Oduche—who was forced to be sent to the church—becoming admiring of the English language and British culture. It's abundantly evident from Achebe's description:

But there was somebody else who had impressed Oduche even more. His name was Blackett, a West Indian missionary. It was said this man although black had more knowledge than white men. Oduche thought that if he could get one-tenth of Blackett's knowledge he would be a great man in Umuaro (46).

Cultural identity is portrayed by Achebe as a weapon of resistance against colonial dominance. The struggle to preserve cultural autonomy and oppose the imposition of foreign values and institutions is seen in the conflict between the Igbo community and British colonial troops. This resistance is personified in the persona of Ezeulu, who struggles to maintain his allegiance to the customs of his people while interacting with colonial authorities. Cultural identity in *Arrow of God* helps the Igbo people feel united and at home. The group is bound together by a common cultural history, despite internal tensions and power struggles. The destabilizing effects of colonialism, which aim to split and subjugate indigenous societies, pose a threat to this oneness.

Jago Morrison in his essay titled "Tradition and Modernity in Chinua Achebe's African Trilogy" articulates "In this essay, I want to propose a different reading of Achebe's project in *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God* that goes some way toward answering these critiques. What Achebe presents in these novels, I will argue, is far from a linear narrative of ideological colonization leading toward inevitable victory for an imperialist model of modernity. The relationship between Igbo society and colonialism is not, as Jefiyo suggests, represented as an impassable gulf between incommensurable systems. Instead, I will suggest, what Achebe is interested in exploring is the possibility for dialogue between precolonial and colonial epistemes, signs of negotiation and accommodation taking place amid the noise of violent struggle. I have argued elsewhere that in Achebe's reflective, later writings, the theme through which he most clearly defines his oeuvre is that of dialogue."

The White people are very clever as Achebe mentions "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." (48) he reflects the fact that how the Whites were clever enough not to use their hard power when they could have easily used their identity against them. The Whites used minimal violence and force by using various strategies one of the infamous one being 'divide and rule' that made the natives question themselves and their own people under the influence of the Whites. The power of the colonizers increased rapidly and did not stop until they had fully controlled the land and psyche of the people that they needed to do in order to control them. Aloys U. OHAEGBU in his paper titled "The African Writer and the Problem of Cultural Identity" has reinstated that "Bearing in mind the existence of cultural pluralism in the world and the fact that culture is relative (in fact, it is often meaningless to people outside the particular human group which it characterizes), the African writer has to get down to his people and culture and present the African vision of the world. Through his works he has, for example, to tell the world about the philosophy behind African community life and solidarity, the sense of the rituals embedded in marriage, birth and death. What this means, in effect, is that the African writer who wishes to identify himself with his people's struggle to maintain their cultural identity has to insert the black man in the global context of his culture as perceived in such areas as history (past and present), oral literature and folklore, religion, human relations in society, relations between man and Nature, industrialization, economics and politics."

### Conclusion

The postcolonial approach, which despises anything non-Western, demands a rereading of the entire colonial epistemology. The task at hand is to complete a monumental journey back in time in order to initiate a more promising future. Still, it takes more than just going back to the traditions to complete this process. It's a journey where one adopts a changed persona while searching for the lost identity amid the warped identities.

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