

## Cultural and Traditional Shifts Following Colonialism in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the shifts and changes in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*. The conflict of two cultures following colonialism brings out a new hybrid culture and identity. According to Homi K. Bhabha, this space created between the two cultures is the third space, and it is the key to the colonizers' imposition of new rules, cultures, languages, and institutions, which is crucial to suppressing and dominating the colonized population. This imposition leads to the degradation and even extinction of the colonized people's preexisting culture, tradition, norms, and religion. It also leads to the hybridization of culture, tradition, norms, and religion. Achebe brings out the changes and shifts in *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*. He shows the importance of culture, tradition, and faith in safeguarding the authenticity of the native people's identity.

**Keywords:** colonialism, identity, culture, hybridity, chinua achebe

### Introduction

Colonialism has brought many changes to African societies in many ways, especially in culture and tradition. The Colonisers not only brought new political systems, but they also changed how people thought, worshipped, worked, and their relations with one another by enforcing their new rule. Colonialism, by denying the dominated people their own historical process, necessarily denies their cultural process. It also led to the hybridisation of their identity. Cabral (1973) argues that imperialist domination, "for its own security, requires cultural oppression and the attempt at direct or indirect destruction of essential elements of the culture of the dominated people."

Chinua Achebe, one of Africa's most celebrated writers, shows these cultural changes and shifts in many of his novels. Two of his best-known works, *Arrow of God* (1964) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960), highlight two different moments in Nigeria's colonial history and show how colonialism affected Igbo society.

*Arrow of God* takes place in the 1920s when British rule in Eastern Nigeria is still new. The Igbo people are still strongly connected to their traditional religion, customs, and political

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structures. Ezeulu, the chief priest of the god Ulu, is central to the story. His struggle to maintain his authority reflects the struggle of Igbo traditions during the early colonial period. In contrast, *No Longer at Ease* is set about thirty years later, just before Nigeria gains independence. Colonial systems are now fully established, and many Africans have become part of these systems through Western education and government employment. Obi Okonkwo, the main character, represents the new class of educated Africans who must live between two different worlds, the traditional world of his parents and the modern world shaped by colonial rule.

Although the two novels take place in different time periods, they are linked by a common theme, the dramatic cultural and traditional changes due to colonialism. Achebe shows that colonialism does not simply replace African traditions with Western values. Instead, it creates a complex identity called the hybrid identity where old and new beliefs meet, clash, mix, and sometimes collapse. Many people become caught between two cultures, unable to fit fully into either. This produces confusion, conflict, and sometimes tragedy. The difference in these two cultures creates a new, unfixed identity. According to Homi K Bhabha, in his *The Location of Culture* (1994), this new unfixed identity is called 'hybrid' identity.

Gikandi (1991) writes that Achebe's novels show the "collision of cultural systems" and the struggles people face when their traditional identity is challenged by outside forces. Irele (2001) also argues that African literature often deals with the tension between tradition and modernity, especially in societies shaped by colonial rule. Cabral (1973) argues that the tie between a people's identity and the reproduction and maintenance of the social system of a specific set of institutions affects both culture and the people's intimate sense of selfhood.

This paper examines the cultural and traditional shifts shown in *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease*. It highlights how colonialism weakened traditional authority, changed family and community values, created new social groups, and caused identity conflicts. The paper also compares the two novels to show how Achebe traces the development of colonial influence from early external challenges to later internal struggles.

### **Background and Cultural Context**

In Igboland, the Igbos did not have kings with absolute authority. Instead, their society was organised around families, clans, age groups, councils of elders, and religious institutions. They have their own god and its own shrines. The supreme God is called "Chukwu". Every male and female is given a personal god or chi at their birth. Decisions were usually made collaboratively. Religion played a major role, guiding moral behaviour and community activities. Priests, diviners, and elders had spiritual and social authority. They also had a marketplace in every village before the colonisers came.

Obiechina (1975) explains that Igbo society was strongly communal. People depended on one another, and success was often shared. Traditions were passed down through rituals, festivals, and stories, and religion helped keep the community united.

The British introduced a new system of governance with warrant chiefs, leaders who often had no traditional legitimacy. This system disrupted the old Igbo customs and traditions. The

introduction of Christianity to them challenged their Igbo religious beliefs. Furthermore, Western education began to change how young people thought about success, authority, and identity. Amuta (1989) describes this situation as a “cultural dialectic,” where African traditions and Western influences constantly interact and compete. In the process, old norms shift to new norms, weaken their tradition and customs, and new values and ideas enter their society.

In *Arrow of God*, the colonial government is still trying to understand and control Igbo society. Traditional leaders like Ezeulu still hold significant power, but colonial interference begins to weaken that power. In contrast, in *No Longer at Ease*, the colonial system has already shaped Nigerian society deeply. Young people now grow up with Western education and colonial institutions. As Palmer (1972) notes, this generation finds itself “caught between two worlds”, their traditional roots and the new modern lifestyle created by colonialism.

### **Cultural and Traditional Shifts in *Arrow of God***

#### **1. Weakening of Traditional Authority**

In *Arrow of God*, when the people of Umuaro and Okperi had a land dispute, war broke out between the two groups. Both sides suffered loss of life, then British colonial officer Captain Winterbottom intervened and stopped the war by making the people of Umuaro lay down their arms. Peace was restored between the two parties. But the traditional order was replaced by a new colonial order imposed by the colonisers.

The colonisers set up courts and prisons as a part of their administration. They even set up a trading post at Okperi. Captain Winterbottom appointed James Ikedi as the Warrant Chief for Okperi. Like his colonial masters, he set up an illegal court and a private prison. He also took illegal taxes in the name of road and drainage construction.

Ezeulu represents the traditional religious authority of the Igbo community. As the chief priest of Ulu, he performs rituals, oversees festivals, and maintains spiritual order. He is the guardian of rituals, especially the New Yam Festival, which marks the beginning of the harvest. His authority comes from religion and tradition, not from force. His jurisdiction is moral and religious rather than political. However, the British colonial officers misunderstood this. They assume that Ezeulu functions like a political chief who can help them control the people. They tried to appoint Ezeulu as the Paramount Chief for Umuaro, but when he refused to cooperate, they arrested him. This act of imprisonment shows how the colonisers interfere with traditions that they do not understand. Since he is in prison, he cannot perform important rituals, including the New Yam Festival, for the beginning of the harvest. The people begin to doubt his power, and his authority weakens. This disrupts the community. Moreover, people become unsure of his power and lose trust in him. The confusion spreads through the community, weakening traditional systems and making people more vulnerable to external influence.

Carroll (1980) notes that Achebe uses this misunderstanding to show how colonial officials undermine traditional structures simply because they do not understand them. When Ezeulu refuses to obey colonial orders, he is arrested.

Achebe highlights that once traditional authority is disrupted, the community becomes confused and vulnerable. People lose confidence both in their leader and in the religious system that has guided them for generations. As a result, this confusion leads to the ground for further breakdown and shifting of their culture and tradition.

## **2. Rise of Christianity**

The Christian missionaries play a huge role in breaking old traditions and customs of the Igbo people. They convinced the colonised people that the worship of their old god was sinful and converted them to Christianity. One of the most important cultural shifts in the novel is the rise and spread of Christianity. When Ezeulu returns from prison, he refuses to announce the New Yam Festival because, according to their tradition, he must count three sacred yams before deciding the date. Since he was in prison, he could not count them properly. He insists that Ulu, not he, controls the ritual.

The villagers fear that eating the new yams before the festival will bring punishment from the gods. The Christian missionaries offer a simple alternative, saying that those who join the church can harvest and eat their yams early without fear. Gikandi (1991) points out that Christianity often succeeds in Achebe's novels not because of spiritual superiority, but because colonial disruption creates situations where traditional leaders lose authority, and people look for practical solutions. People begin converting to Christianity not necessarily because they believe in it but because it solves their immediate problems.

## **3. Internal Problems within Igbo Tradition**

Achebe does not present traditional culture as perfect or without problems. In *Arrow of God*, the character Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, is shown as a flawed human being. He is proud, strict, and unwilling to bend even when his people are suffering. Because he refuses to change or listen to others, he ends up losing the respect and trust of his community. His pride plays a big role in the downfall of his own authority.

Critics like Amuta (1989) argue that Achebe often shows how weaknesses inside a community can make it easier for colonial powers to take control. This idea fits Ezeulu very well. Colonialism is strong and aggressive, but Ezeulu's stubborn behaviour makes the situation even worse. Instead of protecting tradition, he becomes one of the reasons it collapses faster.

Achebe highlights in the novel that tradition does not weaken only because of outsiders. Problems inside the community, such as poor leadership, pride, and refusal to adapt, also contribute to its fall. When Ezeulu refuses to act or change, he leaves his people confused and desperate, which makes them more open to new colonial influences, including the missionaries. He also shows that the changes and shifts in culture and tradition happen because of both external pressures and internal issues.

## **4. Generational Change and Cultural Mixing**

Another important shift involves Ezeulu's son, especially Oduche. Ezeulu sends Oduche to the missionary school so the family can understand the ways of the white man. This shows that even strong traditionalists recognise that the world is changing. However, Oduche becomes

influenced by Christian teachings and begins to stray from traditional beliefs. The new missionary teacher, Mr John Goodcountry, told Oduche as a Christian, he should kill the sacred python since the snake deceived our first mother Eve. He was also pressurised, saying that if he was afraid to kill the snake, he should not be counted as a Christian.

He locks the sacred python in a box, an act that deeply offends the community. It becomes clear that a cultural divide is forming between the older and younger generations. Ezeulu's children represent another form of cultural change. His son Oduche is sent to the missionary school, partly because Ezeulu believes it is important to understand the ways of the white man. This decision shows that even strong traditionalists know the world is changing.

But this choice backfires. Oduche begins to accept Christian teachings and becomes distant from his traditional roots. His action of locking the sacred python in a box, a serious offence in Igbo religion, shows how far he has moved from conventional beliefs. Young people like Oduche become symbols of cultural mixing. They live between two worlds, neither fully traditional nor fully European. This generational conflict shows how colonialism reshapes cultural identity over time. The elders hold onto traditions, but the younger generation begins to adopt new beliefs and new ambitions.

Obiechina (1975) notes that young characters in African literature often symbolise societies in transition. Oduche represents cultural hybridity. He is caught between traditional Igbo religion and Western Christianity. This generational conflict shows how colonialism reshapes identity over time.

### **Cultural and Traditional Shifts in *No Longer at Ease***

#### **1. Western Education and Its Mixed Effects**

In *No Longer at Ease*, Western education plays a very important role in the novel. Umofia Progressive Union is composed of people living outside the village of Umofia, an Igbo village in Eastern Nigeria and the hometown of Obi Okonkwo. They raise money to support and send brighter young Umofians to study in England. They paid for him to study in England, expecting those they sent to return and help the community. Obi Okonkwo is sent to England to study law by the union. He studied English instead of law. When he returns, he is understood to be "their son," someone who will use his education to help his community. However, Obi's education also creates distance between him and his traditional background. He begins to think more like the colonial administrators and less like his parents and elders.

Palmer (1972) notes that Achebe portrays Western education as both beneficial and damaging. It offers social mobility and confidence, but it also alienates individuals from their cultural roots. Obi's struggle to balance these two influences shows the mixed effects of colonial schooling. In the novel, the effects of colonialism are no longer new. They have become part of society. Western education is now highly valued because it leads to government jobs. Obi Okonkwo is an example of this new educated African.

Education gives Obi new ideas, confidence, and opportunities. But it also creates problems. He becomes critical of traditional expectations and struggles to fit into both the modern world and his traditional culture. Achebe shows that education gives power but also creates distance. Obi

thinks differently from his parents and elders, and this difference creates tension. Education becomes a tool of both social mobility and cultural alienation.

## **2. Decline of Communal Values**

In Igbo culture, success is meant to be shared. Because Obi's community contributed money for his education, they expect him to help others in return. They want him to support the village, provide scholarships, and find jobs for younger villagers. He believes in merit-based success, a value he learned in the Western education system. Irele (2001) explains that colonial modernity introduced individualism, which weakened communal values. Obi's attitude towards his community shows how cultural values shift when people begin to prioritise their own goals over collective responsibility.

A conflict between communal responsibility and individual success arises. Obi sees these expectations from his community as burdensome. His Western education has taught him to think more individually. He believes that people should get jobs based on merit, not because of family or village ties. This conflict shows how colonialism introduces new values that clash with traditional ones. Obi's struggles show how communal values weaken in a world where individual achievement has become the main path to success.

## **3. Corruption as a Cultural Crisis**

Corruption is also one of the key themes in the novel. Obi initially refuses to accept bribes, believing that honesty is modern and civilised. However, as he faces financial pressure from supporting his family, paying back debts from his time in England, and meeting community expectations, he becomes vulnerable. Eventually, he accepts a bribe, and this leads to his downfall.

Amuta (1989) argues that corruption in colonial systems is structural, not just personal. Colonial bureaucracy makes it difficult for people to succeed honestly. Obi's experience shows how colonial administrative systems create moral pressure on Africans. Colonial bureaucracy claims to be based on fairness and rules, but in practice, it creates a system where people are forced to break rules to survive. Obi's downfall reflects a larger societal problem. Corruption becomes normal because the system itself is flawed. Corruption is not just a moral failure; it is a cultural crisis caused by the clash between traditional obligations and colonial structures.

## **4. Identity Conflict and the Osu Caste System**

Obi's romantic relationship with Clara highlights another cultural conflict. Clara belongs to Osu, a caste considered outcast in Igbo tradition. Even though Obi has a Western education, which encourages equality, he cannot escape the power of traditional beliefs. His mother strongly opposes the marriage and would rather die than see her son marry an Osu.

Obiechina (1975) emphasises that Achebe often shows the persistence of certain customs despite modern influences. The Osu system survives colonialism, illustrating how deep some traditions remain. Clara's suffering reflects the difficulty of escaping traditional social boundaries.



This conflict shows how deeply the cultural beliefs remain even in a changing society. Clara, who suffers because of her Osu background, represents those who are caught between old customs and new ways. Her modern lifestyle does not protect her from discrimination based on traditional taboos. Their relationship shows that colonialism changes many things but does not erase all traditional beliefs. Some traditions stay on even when they cause suffering and conflict to people.

## **Comparing the Two Novels**

### **1. External Conflict vs. Internal Conflict**

In *Arrow of God*, the conflict is mostly external. It takes place between the traditional Igbo political system and the British colonial administration. The problems come mainly from outside forces, colonial officers, new laws, and the pressure to change traditional ways. The struggle is about power, authority, and control over the community. It is a direct, physical, and political conflict.

In *No Longer at Ease*, the conflict is internal. Instead of fighting colonial officers, characters like Obi struggle within themselves. Obi tries to balance traditional expectations like supporting his family, community and respecting his culture with modern, Western ideas he learned in school. This creates emotional stress and moral confusion. The battle is not between two governments or systems, but within an individual's mind. He feels torn between two worlds and cannot fully belong to either.

Gikandi (1991) explains that this change is typical of Achebe's way of showing colonial history. In the beginning, colonialism causes open and obvious conflicts—such as political fights and cultural clashes. But later, the effects of colonialism move inside the minds of the people. The conflict becomes emotional and psychological.

This shift shows that colonialism does not remain only an outside force. Over time, it enters society and begins to shape people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour. This creates a hybrid society, where people mix traditional values with modern, colonial ideas. They are no longer fighting outsiders; instead, they are fighting within themselves, trying to decide who they are and where they belong.

### **2. Changing Forms of Authority**

In *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu's authority comes from tradition and religion. He is respected because he is the chief priest, the link between the people and their gods. However, he begins to lose his power for two main reasons: the colonial officials do not understand his role, and he himself is too rigid. He refuses to adjust his leadership style even when the community is suffering. His strong commitment to tradition becomes a weakness when the world around him is changing. In *No Longer at Ease*, Obi's authority is very different. It comes from his Western education and his position in the modern colonial government. People expect him to be a model of progress, honesty, and success. But Obi loses his moral authority when he becomes overwhelmed by financial pressure, family expectations, and the corrupt environment of colonial bureaucracy. Both men, in different ways, fail to survive the new colonial reality.

Palmer (1972) suggests that Achebe uses these failures to show how hard leadership becomes when a society is changing quickly. In both novels, the collapse of authority is not simply the fault of the individual; it also reflects the confusion and instability brought by colonialism. Achebe shows that the traditional system represented by Ezeulu is not perfect, but the modern colonial system represented by Obi is also full of flaws. Neither the old ways nor the new ways can fully solve the problems of a society caught between two cultures. By presenting both leaders as struggling and ultimately failing, Achebe highlights the difficulty of finding stable leadership in a world where tradition and modernity are constantly clashing.

### 3. Tragic Fall of the Protagonists

Both Ezeulu and Obi experience tragic downfalls. Ezeulu, once a powerful and respected priest, loses his authority when he refuses to change and when the colonial government misunderstands his role. As everything he believes in begins to collapse, he becomes mentally unstable. His tragedy shows the high cost of trying to protect tradition in a world that is being reshaped by colonial forces. Obi, on the other hand, represents the modern, educated generation. Even though he has a good education and a promising career, he becomes trapped by financial pressure, family and community responsibilities, and a corrupt colonial system. In the end, he is caught accepting a bribe, and his future is destroyed. Both characters fall because they cannot successfully deal with the changes happening around them.

Carroll (1980) notes that Achebe uses these tragic endings to show how deeply individuals suffer during times of rapid cultural change. The society is shifting so quickly—from traditional values to modern, colonial influences that neither the old nor the young know how to cope. Ezeulu's tragedy represents the older generation, who struggle to defend their traditions but find themselves powerless against colonial disruption. Obi's tragedy represents the younger generation, who try to build new lives within the colonial world but become overwhelmed by its pressures and contradictions. Together, their stories show that cultural change does not affect only societies; it also breaks individual lives, leaving people caught between worlds and unable to find a stable place to stand.

### 4. Rise of Hybrid Identities

Characters like Oduche in *Arrow of God* and Obi in *No Longer at Ease* show what it means to have a hybrid identity, an identity shaped by mixing both traditional Igbo culture and Western colonial influences. Oduche is sent to the Christian mission school so he can learn the ways of the Europeans, yet he still comes from a traditional family. Obi is educated in England and returns home with Western ideas, but he is still expected to obey traditional customs. Irele (2001) describes this kind of mixed identity as “double consciousness,” meaning these individuals see themselves through two different cultural lenses. They never feel fully at home in either world. They are caught between old values and new expectations, and this creates inner conflict. Fink (1999) observes that hybridity is compelled rather than chosen.

The two novels show that colonialism does not simply replace traditional culture with a new one. Instead, it creates people who carry parts of both cultures within them. This mixing of old and new values is called hybridity. It brings both opportunity and confusion. On one hand, it allows characters to navigate different worlds. On the other hand, it creates confusion because



they struggle to understand who they really are. Achebe shows that cultural change is not just about losing tradition or accepting modernity. It is about learning to live in a space where both exist at the same time. This hybrid identity can be difficult to manage, but it reflects the real effects of colonial influence on individuals and communities.

## Conclusion

Achebe's *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease* provide powerful insights into how colonialism changed African cultural and traditional systems. In *Arrow of God*, Achebe highlights early colonial disruption and how colonialism disrupts traditional, religious and political systems. Traditional beliefs are directly confronted and weakened by colonial actions and by internal weaknesses within the community, and traditional leaders like Ezeulu face direct challenges from British administrators. The weakening of traditional authority creates opportunities for the colonisers and Christian missionaries to spread, helping them in breaking old Igbo customs and traditions. Internal conflicts within the Igbo community also contribute to the collapse of traditional structures. In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe explores the later stage, when colonial influences have become part of everyday life. Western education, new job opportunities, and colonial bureaucracy shape the identities and values of young Africans like Obi Okonkwo. The conflict is no longer between two separate systems but within individuals who struggle to balance traditional expectations with modern values. This leads to moral confusion, corruption, broken relationships, and personal collapse. Critics such as Gikandi, Irele, Amuta, and Obiechina help us see that Achebe's message is not simple. He does not present precolonial tradition as perfect, nor does he portray Western culture as superior. Instead, he shows that both have strengths and weaknesses, and the real challenge is the sudden and complicated changes caused by colonial rule. Achebe's novels show that cultural transformation is painful and confusing, especially when societies are forced to change too quickly.

Through the stories of Ezeulu and Obi, Achebe raises important questions about leadership, cultural survival, moral responsibility, and personal identity. These questions remain relevant today, as many societies around the world still face cultural pressures from globalisation, modernisation, and historical trauma. Achebe's work continues to remind readers that understanding cultural change requires sensitivity, respect, and a deep awareness of the human struggles involved. Through *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease*, Chinua Achebe presents a powerful picture of how colonialism changes African culture and tradition. Achebe's overall message is that cultural change under colonial rule is complex and painful. It is not only about losing traditional ways or gaining modern ones. Instead, it involves deep struggles within families, communities, and individuals. Both novels show that colonialism reshapes society from the outside and the inside, creating hybrid identities and uncertain futures. Achebe does not present a simple judgment. He does not say that traditional culture was perfect or that Western culture is superior. Instead, he shows that both have strengths and weaknesses and that the real problems arise when societies are forced to change too quickly, without time for stable adaptation.

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