



The Interplay of Religious and Political Power in Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God explores the complex intersection of religious and political power in colonial Igbo society. Set in the early 20th century, the novel portrays a community at the crossroads of tradition and colonial influence. Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, embodies religious authority in the village of Umuaro, holding significant sway over its spiritual and temporal life. However, his position is increasingly challenged by the encroaching British colonial administration, which seeks to impose its political structures and Christian religion on the indigenous people. The novel presents a tension between spiritual leadership rooted in indigenous beliefs and the political manipulation exerted by colonial authorities. Achebe skillfully illustrates how religion and politics were intertwined in precolonial society and how colonialism disrupted this balance by introducing competing systems of governance and belief. Ezeulu's downfall symbolizes the broader breakdown of traditional structures under colonial pressure. His isolation reflects the community's struggle to choose between ancestral religion and Christianity, between indigenous rule and colonial authority. This paper investigates how Achebe critiques both traditional rigidity and colonial imposition, revealing the devastating consequences of power struggles in a transitional society. By analyzing the themes of divine authority, colonial governance, and individual agency, this study highlights the novel's deep engagement with the cultural and political transformations of its time.

Keywords: colonialism, religion, power struggles, Ezeulu, Igbo society, political conflict

Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God is a nuanced narrative that delves into the shifting power dynamics between religion and politics in the fictional Igbo village of Umuaro during the early twentieth century. At the heart of the novel lies the figure of Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, whose spiritual authority over the people is both revered and feared. Achebe constructs Ezeulu's character as a representative of sacred, ancestral power deeply rooted in indigenous tradition. However, the growing presence of British colonial officials and Christian missionaries in Umuaro introduces a rival system of power that directly challenges the legitimacy of traditional leadership. The resulting tension reveals a broader

commentary on the cultural erosion and political displacement caused by colonialism.

Ezeulu's role as chief priest of Ulu is not just religious but deeply political. In precolonial Igbo society, religious authority often intersected with governance, shaping decisions about agriculture, justice, and inter-village relations. Ezeulu commands respect because he is believed to be the mouthpiece of Ulu, the god of Umuaro. His influence over the community's agricultural calendar, particularly the timing of the New Yam Festival, gives him immense power over the people's livelihood. This sacred authority is tested when the colonial administration attempts to involve him in their governance.



When Ezeulu is invited to join the British colonial administration as a “white man’s chief,” he refuses, suspecting that accepting such a position would compromise his spiritual role. His rejection of this offer places him in direct conflict with the colonial authorities, particularly the District Officer, Winterbottom. This conflict exposes the incompatibility between the indigenous system, which sees power as sacred and communal, and the colonial system, which seeks to centralize and control power for administrative convenience.

Achebe uses the colonial intervention in Umuaro to show how foreign powers often manipulated local institutions to establish control. The British attempt to co-opt Ezeulu into their administration illustrates their strategy of indirect rule, where local leaders were used to enforce colonial policies. However, this approach fails in Umuaro because of the complexity and sanctity of Igbo religious structures.

Ezeulu’s refusal to submit to colonial expectations results in his imprisonment, a pivotal moment in the novel that symbolizes the clash between religious tradition and foreign political power. The act of detaining a spiritual leader undermines not only Ezeulu’s personal dignity but also the religious framework of the community. His absence from the village causes confusion and fear among the people, as no one else can determine the dates for the New Yam Festival.

During Ezeulu’s imprisonment, Christianity gains ground in Umuaro. The people, desperate to harvest their crops but unable to do so without Ezeulu’s religious sanction, begin to turn to the Christian church, which offers them a solution free from traditional constraints. This moment marks a critical shift in power: the colonial religion begins to replace the indigenous one, not by force, but through strategic exploitation of cultural disruption.

Achebe shows how religion becomes a tool of colonization. Christianity’s promise of freedom from ancestral obligations appeals to villagers who are struggling with hunger and confusion. As Ezeulu stands firm in refusing to authorize the New Yam Festival after his return, his rigidity alienates him from his own people. What was once perceived as spiritual strength now appears to be obstinacy. The people’s conversion to Christianity is not just a

religious shift but a political act of defiance against Ezeulu’s absolute authority.

Ezeulu’s personal tragedy is deeply intertwined with the communal transformation in Umuaro. His son, Oduche, is sent to the missionary school as part of a strategy to understand the colonial world better. Ironically, this decision contributes to the undermining of his authority. Oduche converts to Christianity and openly challenges the authority of his father and the god Ulu. This internal family conflict mirrors the larger societal fragmentation caused by colonial intrusion.

Achebe uses Ezeulu’s downfall to demonstrate the vulnerability of traditional power structures in the face of systemic colonial strategies. Ezeulu’s unwavering commitment to his role as the priest of Ulu blinds him to the shifting political landscape. His refusal to compromise, while noble in intention, leads to his isolation and the erosion of his influence. The final blow comes when the people harvest their crops without his blessing and turn to the Christian god instead.

The collapse of Ezeulu’s authority symbolizes the broader collapse of Igbo traditional structures. Achebe does not portray colonialism as a simple replacement of one system with another, but as a process that destabilizes the very foundations of identity and governance. Ezeulu’s story is a cautionary tale about the dangers of rigidity in times of change and the destructive impact of foreign rule on indigenous ways of life.

The political implications of Ezeulu’s fall are significant. With the weakening of religious authority, colonial administrators gain more control over Umuaro, and Christianity becomes the dominant faith. This religious conversion also signals a shift in political loyalty—from ancestral gods and elders to colonial rulers and missionaries. Achebe illustrates that in colonized societies, religion and politics are deeply connected, and control over one often leads to control over the other.

While Achebe sympathizes with the plight of characters like Ezeulu, he also critiques their failures. Ezeulu’s inability to adapt to the new political reality and his excessive pride contribute to his downfall. Achebe does not romanticize the past but presents a realistic picture of a society struggling to balance



tradition with the demands of a changing world. Achebe's nuanced portrayal invites readers to consider the complexities of resistance. Ezeulu resists both colonial power and the internal decay of his own authority. His fall suggests that resistance must be strategic, not merely symbolic. Achebe thus critiques both colonial oppression and traditional inflexibility.

Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* powerfully examines the interplay of religious and political power in a society caught between tradition and colonization. Through the character of Ezeulu, Achebe explores how sacred authority functions within a traditional society and how it is disrupted by colonial governance and missionary influence. The novel reveals how colonialism destabilized not only the political structures but also the religious and cultural foundations of indigenous communities. Ezeulu's fall is symbolic of a wider collapse—an

identity crisis that left communities fragmented and uncertain. Achebe's work stands as a profound meditation on power, identity, and survival in the face of cultural invasion.

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