

RETHINKING THE PEDIGREES OF AFRICAN CULTURAL WATERSHED: A POST-COLONIAL INQUEST INTO CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD*

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ABSTRACT

The African cultural identities have undergone earth-shattering shifts from the pre-colonial epoch to the colonial and post-colonial periods. It is the colonial empire that advented in the African continent in the 15th century and attempted to erode and stigmatise African cultural practices as part of its mission to take control of Africa. Despite Africa being under a democratic administration today, African cultural identities are still marginalised, chiefly, by colonial remnants that have not yet been successfully uprooted. Thus, this paper aims to re-anatomise the African cultural identity-crisis in the present day from the onset of colonialism in the continent. It utilises a qualitative method to crystallise this African cultural watershed from a literary perspective. This noted, Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* is purposively sampled for this paper as a primary reference point by dint of its conformity to the main theme of the study. The paper, comprehensively, blames the enduring colonial fragments in the present day for the African cultural identity-crisis as they hinder decolonisation and peril African cultures. The colonial legacies in Africa today, like in the colonial times, are found to be championing Western identities at the expense of African cultural identities, hence, the latter is still menaced.

Keywords: African identities, Colonialism, Culture, Western identities

INTRODUCTION

The pre-colonial antiquity of Africa depicts the continent as an institution of civilisation that richly embraced cultural belief systems. According to Montle (2021), these cultural norms served as guiding principles in all spheres of African endeavour. They were, *inter alia*, utilised to assert gender roles, educate, communicate, convey meaning and maintain peace and discipline. Essentially, cultural conventions served as an educational device in the pre-colonial African context where the culturally-driven tuition was and is still dubbed oral literature. This encompasses an engagement with riddles, proverbs, folktales, songs, myths, idioms, legends and epic poems for a particular objective such as to have fun, guide and educate. Rodney (1972, 70) notes that "the colonisers did not introduce education into Africa; they introduced a new set of formal educational institutions which partly supplemented and partly replaced those which were there before." It is the colonisers that arrived in the African continent and perceived Africans as being in possession of "no cultural traditions of their own, no religious, economic or political background worthy of serious attention" (Roscoe 1970, 1). As a result, the coloniser imposed Western cultures, religions and ideas upon the African natives

and this affected the aboriginal African cultural belief systems. The coloniser's attempt to enforce Western identities upon Africans waged a clash of identities that resulted in a crisis that is still prevailing today. Several studies such as Montle (2021), Mogoboya & Montle (2020), Asma (2015) and Afisi (2008) have sought to explore the catalysts of African cultural identity-crisis in the modern day but have not anatomised the pretexts of this crisis from its foundational roots and the circuitous manner in which it has warmed its way into the post-independence dispensation. The study identifies this as the gap and employs Achebe's *Arrow of God* to relay an image of the dawn of African cultural identity-crisis and its constant development. This noted, the study would endeavour to respond to the research questions that it is premised on such as what are the pretexts of African cultural watershed, why are colonial remnants are still enduring and how can African cultural identities be re-essentialised.

THEORETICAL LENS OF THE STUDY

The paper hinges on Post-colonial theory to dichotomise the pedigrees of African cultural watershed. Africa, like other continents around the globe, was colonised by European powers, hence, Post-colonial theory is germane to undergird this study as it ordinarily centres on previously colonised states. The antique scholars of post-colonial theory such as Lye and Waldron (1998, 10) assert that "Post-colonial theory deals with the reading and writing of literature written in previously or currently colonised countries, or literature written in colonising countries, which deals with colonisation or colonised peoples." This is also maintained by the contemporary sages of post-colonial studies like Ashcroft (2017, 1) who state that "Post-colonial theory deals with the effects of colonisation on cultures and societies and those societies' responses." Furthermore, due to Post-colonial theory's comprehensive approach to colonially rooted maladies, the researcher observed the essence of including the theory of Afrocentricity to enhance the study's focus, which is post-colonial Africa. According to Monteiro-Ferreira (2009), Afrocentricity is a theoretical approach that aims to hub the experiences of Africans in the continent and diaspora within their socio-historical and cultural perspectives. As the study's focal point of inquest is the post-colonial context of Africa, Afrocentricity becomes a pertinent aid of the Post-colonial theory to underpin the study and crystallise the pedigrees of African cultural watershed in the post-colonial period through the lens of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, in which, the writer "bears witness to the foundational and historical wound of post-colonial Nigeria and Africa" (Msiska 2018, 48). The post-colonial setting of most African societies exudes colonial maladies that are still virtually at their prime. Various scholars have explored these ills and their impact on socio-economic and development of Africa. For stance, Sall (2018) points out the appalling levels of racial tension and debasement of standards in some African societies as legacies of colonialism that are still rearing their ugly heads in the continent. Furthermore, other scholars of post-coloniality such as Dlova, Hamed, and Tsoka-Gwegweni, J (2015) are concerned about the lethargic resuscitation of African identities, which are so outpaced Eurocentric identities in today's Africa. These researchers conducted a study in which they explored the role of the colonial past in the preference of a skin stone. The scholars found that Africa has not yet been de-westernised or emancipated from colonial identities as many Africans still subscribe to the colonial notion that the black skin tone is ugly and the white one is

beautiful. Moreover, participants (black women) in Gwaravanda (2011, 1) confessed to resorting to the use of skin whitening products as a dark skin tone is “embarrassing and humiliating”. This vindicates the extent to which African identities are ostracised in the modern day.

METHODS

Research method and Design

This paper sets out to rethink the pedigrees of the African cultural watershed in the post-colonial context through the prism of Achebe’s literary text, *Arrow of God*. By virtue of its literariness, the study utilises a qualitative research method, which is usually non-empirical and is employed to aid the researcher to comprehend the characteristics, attitudes and reactions of the phenomenon being studied (Babbie 2014). Furthermore, as the study is literary in nature, it adopts textual analysis as its design, which is mainly employed “for the close readings of literary texts, these methods also rely on literary theory and background information to support the reading” (Mauer & Venecek 2021, 205).

Data collection

The study is purely text-based and collects its primary data from Achebe’s selected novel, *Arrow of God*. The data from the chosen literary text is supplemented by data collected from other secondary sources such as the internet, journal articles and academic books.

Sampling

The researcher uses a purposive sampling method to choose Achebe’s *Arrow of God* as a case in point for this study amongst other post-colonial African novels because of its outstanding depiction of the focal theme of the paper. According to Lucas (2014), a purposive sampling technique qualifies the researcher to choose a sample on the basis of its characteristics that are believed to be applicable to the study. Thus, the researcher selected Achebe’s *Arrow of God* due to its delineation of the colonial influence on African cultural identity-crisis.

Data analysis

The data collected for this study is analysed, presented and discussed through relevant themes that are aligned to the main objective of the study, which is to unveil the pretexts of African cultural identity-crisis in the post-colonial setting. To effect this, the researcher employs a qualitative thematic content analysis method, which is “the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data” (Maguire & Delahun 2017, 3352).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section of the paper presents and discusses the findings from Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, which is the primary reference point to fulfil the main objective of the study. The findings are presented and categorised according to these themes: The aboriginal African cultural identity, The genesis of African cultural watershed and The interface between African culture and Christianity.

The aboriginal African cultural identity

Achebe’s *Arrow of God* brilliantly provides an image of the aboriginal African cultural identity. This is the earliest African cultural identity that had no foreign contact. The novel sets in Nigeria and its opening scenes depict this aboriginal African cultural identity before the crisis emerged. This utterance: “then the new

moon sometimes hid itself for many days behind rain clouds so that when it finally came out it was already half-grown. And while it played its game the Chief Priest sat up every evening waiting," (Achebe 1964, 1) exudes fanatical belief in cultural doctrines. The aforementioned point is confirmed by the mentioning of a Chief priest and reaction to the moon. In the African context, particularly the Nigerian kinfolk, chief priests serve as "mediators between the people and the deities and consciously offer reasonable guidance and assistance to the people in their dealings with the spiritual forces" (Oloidi 2020, 1). The comportment of the moon, in the African culture, is also associated with various meanings depending on the tribe concerned. Vannier (2020, 70) notes that in the context of Umuaro in South Nigeria where Achebe's *Arrow of God* sets in, "the moon informs the timing and regulation of numerous social activities and its regular presence and absence in the night sky is part of a matrix that connects people, communities, nature, the heavens, spirits, and God." The cultural traits in the opening of the novel substantiate that Africa was opulently framed by cultural belief systems. This could be further braced by the chief priest, Ezeulu's belief in ancestral worship, blood sacrifice and the construction of a shrine:

"Ulu, I thank you for making me see another new moon. May I see it again and again. May this household be healthy and prosperous. As this is the moon of planting may the six villages plant with profit. May we escape danger in the farm—the bite of a snake or the sting of the scorpion, the mighty one of the scrubland. May we not cut our shinbone with the machet or the hoe. May our wives bear male children. May we increase in numbers at the next counting of the villages so that we shall sacrifice a cow and not a chicken as we did after the last New Yam feast. May children put their fathers into the earth and not fathers their children. May good meet the face of every man and every woman. May good come to the land of the riverain folk and to the land of the forest peoples" (Achebe 1964, 3).

The ancient African cultural kingdoms relied on appeasing their ancestors for success, protection, healing, wisdom and guidance. These ancestors were the only source of the African natives' spiritual contentment and they would perform rituals and blood sacrifices to earn their favour. Thus, the predominant setting of the novel, the Umuaro area was very cultural and rituals were performed in this vicinity for various reasons. One of the captivating ritual nuances in the novel is the allusion to the symbol known as *Ikenga*:

Figure 1: *Ikenga*



Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ikenga>

According to Klemm, Zucker and Sanyal (2022, i), “when an Igbo male comes of age, he may ritually be offered an *ikenga*, which becomes not only his proud possession to be preserved and honoured for the rest of his life, but is also an integral part of his identity as a unique individual.” This is substantiated by the narrator’s remark in the novel: “I may explain that *ikenga* is the most important fetish in the Ibo man’s arsenal, so to speak. It represents his ancestors to whom he must make a daily sacrifice. When he dies it is split in two; one half is buried with him and the other half is thrown away” (Achebe 1964, 15).

The genesis of African cultural watershed

Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, subsequent to delineating the aboriginal African cultural identity, set out to portray the genesis of African cultural identity-crisis and its development until the post-colonial day. The novel pinpoints the arrival of colonialists in the African continent as the inception of a cultural crisis. The colonialists, who hail from the European world, advented in Africa with their identities that clashed with those of Africans. It is these European forces’ intervention in African affairs that eroded the African understanding of life and engendered a cultural crisis (Montle, 2020). This is portrayed in Achebe’s *Arrow of God* where the arrival of colonialists in the ancient Nigeria brought about alterations to the cultural systems that Africans had embraced. This was driven by the Europeans’ stereotypical attitudes against African culture:

“His (Winterbottom) bedclothes were sodden and his head formed a waterlogged basin on the pillow. After the first stretch of unrestful sleep he would lie awake, tossing about until he was caught in the distant throb of drums. He would wonder what unspeakable rites went on in the forests at night, or was it the heart-beat of the African darkness? Then one night he was terrified when it suddenly occurred to him that no matter where he lay awake at night in Nigeria the beating of the drums came with the same constancy and from the same elusive distance. Could it be that the throbbing came from his own heat-stricken brain?” (Achebe 1964, 13).

The colonialists found the African cultural identity too diverse from theirs and perceived it as dark, savage, backward and unsophisticated and theirs as light, pure, innocent and refined. This colonial perception is still enduring today as modern-day researchers such as Kanuma (2011, i) comment that “there are reasons why Africa is such a backward place: why it is the beggar continent that perpetually lives off handouts called ‘foreign aid’ even as it sits on an abundance of natural resources; why most of its countries are lands of broken down infrastructure, stratospheric jobless rates, ramshackle government institutions, education systems.” Equally important, Achebe’s *Arrow of God* also points out that the colonialists depicted themselves as cultured and one of their mission included bringing the light to the African continent, which they deemed as dark:

“Fifteen years ago Winterbottom might have been so depressed by the climate and the food as to have doubts about service in Nigeria. But he was now a hardened coaster, and although the climate still made him irritable and limp, he would not now exchange the hard life for the comfort of Europe. His strong belief in the value of the British mission in Africa was, strangely enough, strengthened during the Cameroon campaign of 1916 when he fought against the Germans. That was how he

had got the title of captain. Unlike many other colonial administrators who also saw active service in the Cameroon he carried his title into peacetime" (Achebe 1964, 13).

The excerpt above substantiates the colonialists' stereotypical perception of Africa being 'backward'. These discriminatory words from the excerpt, "...depressed by the climate and the food as to have doubts about service in Nigeria.... he would not now exchange the hard life for the comfort of Europe," denote that Africa is inferior to Europe. Moreover, Plous and Willians (1995, 795) assert that "this view of blacks was so widely accepted that the entry for Negro in the ninth edition of the Atteridge (1884: 316) stated authoritatively that the African race occupied the lowest position of the evolutionary scale, thus affording the best material for the comparative study of the highest anthropoids and the human species." This noted, it is the colonialists that engineered the inequality based on race.

The interface between African culture and Christianity

The colonialists, in an effort to Westernise and sophisticate the African continent as part of their mission, overran the continent with Christian missionaries. Geering (2002, 21) notes that the term, 'Christianity' "is derived from the Medieval Latin *Christianitas*. It was originally a synonym for Christendom, meaning the geographical domain where Christ ruled ..." Scholars and other political activists postulate that the missionaries played a major in the conquest of Africa. One of the late South African Archbishop, Desmond Tutu's popular quotes orates, "When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land" (Tutu, 1990). Religion became one of the artilleries that the colonialists utilised to astutely conquer the African land. These missionaries preached a gospel that depicted the African cultural practices as evil, thus, a clash between the two identities. Missionaries such as Mr Goodcountry in Achebe's *Arrow of God* encouraged the African natives to turn against their cultural practices, which are deemed evil:

Mr Goodcountry told the converts of Umuaro about the early Christians of the Niger Delta who fought the bad customs of their people, destroyed shrines and killed the sacred iguana. He told them of Joshua Hart, his kinsman who suffered martyrdom in Bonny. "If we are Christians, we must be ready to die for the faith," he said. "You must be ready to kill the python as the people of the rivers killed the iguana. You address the python as Father. It is nothing but a snake, the snake that deceived our first mother, Eve. If you are afraid to kill it do not count yourself a Christian" (Achebe 1964, 20).

According to Manala (2013), Christianity perceived African customs such as the above-mentioned ones as pagan and evil, and ultimately eroded them. This scholar and others point out the colonialists' Christianity as an enduring pretext for African cultural watershed. As life progresses, many people, including Africans, buy into the notion that religion is a better guide in life and this poses a menace to the value of

African culture. Katongole (2001, 179) asserts that “according to 1990 estimates, 41 percent of Africa's 550 million people were Christians ... The percentage is much higher in countries south of the Sahara: Over 60 percent of Ghana's 19 million people are Christian; 65 percent of Cameroonians are Christians.; 75 percent of Zambians are Christians, and 78 percent of Uganda's 20 million people are Christians.” African cultural subscribers such as the former South African president, Jacob Zuma find the expansion of Christianity in the present day as concerning. He is cited in Smith (2021) stating, “Christianity - introduced by European missionaries mainly in the nineteenth century - had destroyed the safety net for orphans, elderly people and the poor” and also said, “As Africans, long before the arrival of religion and [the] gospel, we had our own ways of doing things. Those were times that the religious people refer to as dark days but we know that during those times, there were no orphan[age]s or old-age homes. Christianity has brought along these things” (Smith 2011). The scholars and activists above appear to share a common view regarding the erosion of African cultural systems where colonialism and its canons such as Christianity are blamed.

As portrayed in Achebe's *Arrow of God*, the colonialists persuaded many African natives into believing that the African culture is wicked. It is stated, “The first Umuaro man to kill and eat a python was Josiah Madu of Umuagu. But the story did not spread outside the little group of Christians, most of whom refused, however, to follow Josiah's example. They were led by Moses Unachukwu, the first and the most famous convert in Umuaro” (Achebe 1964, 20). The missionaries' success in having African natives such as Unachukwu convert to Christianity emanates from concrete allusions to some of the agonising cultural obligations such as blood sacrifices, ritual deaths and other decrees:

“I see you are one of the progressive ones. When you've been here as long as Allen was and understood the native a little more you might modify some of your new theories. If you saw, as I did, a man buried alive up to his neck with a piece of roast yam on his head to attract vultures you might have second thoughts. We British are a curious people, doing everything half-heartedly. Look at the French. They are not ashamed to teach their culture to backward races under their charge. Their attitude to the native ruler is clear. They say to him: 'This land has belonged to you because you have been strong enough to hold it. By the same token it now belongs to us. If you are not satisfied come out and fight us.' What do we British do? We flounder from one expedient to its opposite. We do not only promise to secure old savage tyrants on their thrones—or more likely filthy animal skins—we not only do that, but we now go out of our way to invent chiefs where there were none before. They make me sick” (Achebe 1964, 15).

Utterance such as the above quote had many African natives proselytised into Christianity and this worked in the favour of the colonialists. Mills (2011, 2) notes that “most missionaries for a long time pursued the idea of separation of converts from traditional society and encouraged their converts not to participate in many national customs and rites [and] this problem was exacerbated when the missionaries urged their converts to remain neutral in the wars, many others urged

their converts not participate in wars.” The aforementioned point explicates the manner in which the colonialists used religion to emerge victorious against the African natives. This is also demonstrated in Achebe’s *Arrow of God* where Africans were divided as some of them embraced the Christian missionaries whereas others denounced them. This worked to the benefit of the colonialists who joined forces with some African natives to take control of Africa:

“Those guns have a long and interesting history. The people of Okperi and their neighbours, Umuaro, are great enemies. Or they were before I came into the story. A big savage war had broken out between them over a piece of land. This feud was made worse by the fact that Okperi welcomed missionaries and government while Umuaro, on the other hand, has remained backward. It was only in the last four or five years that any kind of impression has been made there. I think I can say with all modesty that the change came after I had gathered and publicly destroyed all firearms in the place except, of course, this collection here. You will be going there frequently on tour. If you hear anyone talking about Otiji-Egbe, you know they are talking about me. Otiji-Egbe means *Breaker of Guns*” (Achebe 1964, 15).

The colonialists as mirrored in Achebe’s *Arrow of God* triumphed over African natives and imposed Western identities such as Christianity upon the Africans. Franz (1998, i) affirms that “colonialism disrupted not only the political organization and economic production of the many African political entities, it also brought forms of cultural alienation, invasion, and disorientation.” The colonialists’ victory over Africans resulted in the erosion of African cultural systems despite the dispensation of independence where the democratic leadership of the continent, which dethroned the colonial administration, at large set out to re-essentialise African cultural identities. Montle (2022) asserts that the contact between African and Western identities engendered a cultural upheaval that still vexes Africa in the present. In the post-colonial period, the Christian religion is persistently expanding and becoming more predominant than African cultural systems. Maxwell (1997, 141) substantiates the aforementioned point:

The expansion of Christianity in twentieth-century Africa has been so dramatic that it has been called ‘the fourth great age of Christian expansion’. According to much-quoted, if somewhat unreliable, statistics, there were 10 million African Christians in 1900, 143 million in 1970, and there will be 393 million in the year 2000, which would mean that 1 in 5 of all Christians would be an African.

Equally important, the aboriginal African cultural identities have been eroded by colonial fragments such as Christianity and the democratic African leadership is yet to satisfactorily rehabilitate them. This could be evidenced by a recent case of discrimination against African cultures in South Africa, which was reported on several media platforms. Sibanyoni (2021) on Sowetan live newspaper reported, “a casual trip to a Midrand mall on Wednesday turned into a nightmare when Ndebele activist and author Thando Mahlangu was allegedly hounded out of the shopping complex by a man who described himself as the mall owner. His sin, apparently, was that he went into the Boulders Mall wearing a Ndebele traditional attire.” It was further reported that Mahlangu said, “You are telling me I’m not supposed to wear African [clothes] in Africa,” and the centre manager told him, “I’m saying this

is a public place... I'm not allowing that here, this is my mall... right of admission is reserved," (Sibanyoni 2021). This incident was condemned by many South Africans who deemed it a legacy of colonialism. Kwena Moabelo in a CNN Newsletter by Princewill (2021) states, "The manager was wrong to deny an African entry to a mall in Africa while wearing African clothes. It speaks more to a colonised mind where an African cannot even take pride in their African cultural attire." This occurrence affirms that African cultural systems are still affected by the colonial past and more still needs to be done to rehabilitate and reessentialise them.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The problems relating to the quintessence of African cultures in the modern day are deeply rooted in colonialism as this paper has reasoned through Achebe's *Arrow of God*. The paper has aimed to uproot the pretexts of African cultural watershed and utilised Achebe's *Arrow of God* to trace this problem from the genesis of the colonisation of Africa. The findings revealed that the colonialists have engendered this African cultural identity-crisis by imposing Western ethos such as the Christian religion, Eurocentric medicine, clothing and leadership upon African natives. This could imply that Africa needs to address and re-address that above mentioned Western identities, which are prevailing today in an effort to re-essentialise African cultural identities. The colonialists have laid a concrete foundation of Eurocentric identities in the African continent and these identities are mostly responsible for the corrosion of African cultures (Montle 2021). Therefore, this paper suggests that African cultures be restored, validated and acclimatised by, first, addressing the foundational Western identities and other colonial remnants in Africa. Future research could centre on mechanisms that could be employed to embrace African cultures and restore their pride.

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