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Arrow of God and the Sanctity of Spiritual Values

Julia Udofia, Ph.D.
University of Uyo, Nigeria
Email:dr_udofia@yahoo.com

Abstract
Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart* can be viewed as historical novels to be understood in the context of the history of colonization and decolonization. However, where *Things Fall Apart* argues for a people of achievement around Okonkwo, *Arrow of God* demonstrates a world that is organized according to spiritual values. The objective of the paper is to investigate the place of God or the gods in the affairs of the people of this novel (Umuaro). The methodology is to first scrutinize the primary text – *Arrow of God* – and with recourse to relevant critical materials, sharpen the focus of the arguments. In the end, it is found that the Igbo who place a high premium on achievement are seen in *Arrow of God* to place an even higher premium on the spiritual dimension of life.

Keywords: Achebe, Arrow, God, Spiritual, Spiritual, Premium, Umuaro

Introduction

In 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation', Achebe writes that 'the worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect', and that where this is the case, it is the writer's duty to help them regain it by showing them what happened to them, what they lost and how they lost it (1964, 158). From 1900 to 1959, the British colonized Nigeria, first, through direct rule, and later, indirect rule. The result was that the people's traditional culture became debased and almost completely eroded. This

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situation which Emenyonu describes as 'the systematic emasculation of the entire culture' (1991, 21) was attended by an acute psychological problem of inferiority complex on the part of the black man *vis-a-vis* the white man and his culture.

Achebe therefore sees his duty as that of 'helping' his society 'regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-debasement' (1975, 3-4). But because the man who 'does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body' (1975, 8), Achebe not only tries to help his people reclaim their lost heritage but also shows them how they lost it. Thus, while 'recognizing the need for a redefinition and re-ordering of values in modern Africa in the wake of the disruptive effects of colonial administration, Achebe also realizes that before this re-ordering can take place, there must be a confrontation with the past' (Palmer 1979, 63), arguing that, 'it will be futile to try and take off before we have repaired our foundations' (1964, 157).

This confrontation with the past is what is investigated in Achebe's novels, especially, the early ones. Writing from what he refers to as 'the inside', Achebe seeks to 'produce the effect of a pre-colonial reality as an Igbo-centric response to a Eurocentrically constructed imperial 'reality' (Yousaf 2003, 38). This is why his early novels have been described as 'counter-narratives and counter-histories of the 'official' European narratives' (Grate 2014, 6). Set mostly in the villages, these novels, especially, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* extol the beauty of the African culture. They present the image of a culture that is ordered, coherent and satisfying so as to dispel the colonial argument of a people of no culture.

However, where *Things Fall Apart* argues for a people of achievement around Okonkwo, *Arrow of God* shows that the Igbo who place a high premium on achievement place an even higher premium on the spiritual sanctity of life. With the kind of spirituality, such a society cannot be defined as 'pagan' as some early European missionaries were wont to. Thus, more than *Things*

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Fall Apart, Arrow of God portrays a world that is organized according to spiritual values; a world where the gods hold a supreme place in the affairs of men. This 'paramountcy of religious beliefs' (Palmer 1979, 65); the supremacy of the world of spirits, as portrayed in *Arrow of God* is discussed in this paper.

The Premium on Spirituality in *Arrow of God*

The third of what is usually referred to as the African trilogy – the other parts being *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease – Arrow of God* is set in the 19th century period of indirect rule in Nigeria when the colonizer was using warrant chiefs to rule. This novel which can be described as a consolidation of the first describes the customs, beliefs and traditional culture of the Igbo people of Nigeria. It 'synthesizes the mythic, religious, cultural, economic and social traditions of the Igbo in a bid to explore the African condition' (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 2000, 99). But more importantly, the novel asserts the supremacy of the world of spirits in the affairs of the people. In their enclosed order and transition from tribal enclaves to larger economic communities, the people demonstrate unquestioned loyalty to the spiritual. Thus, more than *Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God* demonstrates that there is a human hunger of the soul higher than the physical hunger that we know of.

Ezeulu is the embodiment of this spiritual existence of the people. He is the Chief Priest of Ulu, a god created by the people of Umuaro in a time of crisis to rule over the individual gods of the six 'federated' villages and thereby to increase the security of the loose federation of the Umuaro clan. As Ezeulu himself points out, he is part-man and part-spirit; that part of him painted white for ceremonial occasions being spiritual. So he has more insights than ordinary human beings as revelations are made to him through dreams and visions. Akuebue, who is also Ezeulu's severest critic, recognizes this duality of Ezeulu's nature. According to Ezeulu: 'I can see things where other men are blind. That is why I am known

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and at the same time unknowable. You cannot know that thing which beats the drum to which Ezeulu dances' (123).

Ezeulu, therefore, is the symbol of the religious and spiritual authority among the people. He is the embodiment and custodian of the people's tradition, customs and rituals; the 'arrow of god'; the instrument of the god he serves. Akwanya and Anohu describe him as the 'fountainhead' (2001, 56) of the traditional system; the exemplar of the ancestral religion and its traditions. As the pillar and 'corner-stone of the people's traditional religion, only he can name the day of the New Yam Festival and of the Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves. He it is who annually cleanses the six villages of their sins, crimes and abominations of the year. He represents the will of his god here on earth.

The novel, therefore, opens with a spiritual experience with Ezeulu performing the representative task of eating the sacred yam. As he comes into the arena, we hear him clashing with unseen presences. He thus, communes with a living God as he offers his representative prayer full of ancestral seriousness. This prayer, as Emelia Oko observes, is one 'full of universal goodwill and benediction' (1990, 2).

The spiritual individual is also prominently characterized: he is of a complexion that suggests a moral difference: 'tall as an iroko, and his skin white like the sun. In his youth he was called *nwa anyanwu* (12). Also, he has the lonely strength of a tragic individual; uncompromising in his moral judgement and dedicated only to his god and as Oko further observes, this strength is part of his weakness since it is his lack of compromise that is going to contribute to the change of fortunes in the novel.

In addition, Ezeulu has the 'hard but respectable arrogance' of a Chief Priest of a powerful god (Emenyonu 130) and as the symbol of the people's religious and spiritual values, he is the epitome of integrity who tells the truth at all times no matter how damaging it is to his community. But it is not only his physical and spiritual

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features that are distinct, his *obi* is also built differently from those of others, for, in addition to the usual long entrance in front, there is also a shorter one at the back from where he watches the sky for the new moon.

Achebe, therefore, uses Ezeulu to illuminate the ideals of his people. His spirituality is part of his people's way of life; a life of the spiritual union with the temporal. And so, it is not surprising that in important decision-making, Ulu it is that makes the choices. For instance, in the burial of Aneto's father, the oracle is consulted and adhered to for the ceremonial burial. Similarly, on the recent invasion of Umuaro by the white man, it is the oracle's prophecy that the white man has come to take over the land and rule the people. He therefore works out that it would be wise to have a man of one's own family in white man's camp. Also before embarking on any war, the people must first be sure that their case is clear and just otherwise they could not count on the support of their gods, which is why Ezeulu refuses to back his people in the fight with Okperi, describing it as a war of 'blame'. In his words, 'how could a man who held the holy staff of Ulu know that a thing was a lie and speak it?' (6-7). And so, Ezeulu believes that the judgement against his people in the dispute is a vindication of Ulu's position in the matter; a divine will come true. Akuebue, who though is Ezeulu's friend, is also his severest critic emphasizes this in the sacred yam episode that Ezeulu is stubborn but cannot eat the sacred yam out of season and thereby invalidate its spiritual import. In his words: 'I know Ezeulu better than most people. He is a proud man and the most stubborn person you know is only his messenger; but he would not falsify the decision of Ulu. If he did it, Ulu would not spare him' (212).

It is also in this spiritual context that we understand *Ikenga;* a world that recognizes ancestors and justifies Ebo's homicide. This world also explains Akukalia's psychological inadequacy stemming from his impotence which leads to the unjustified desecration. But

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the colonizer misrepresents it as fetish and as an act of drunkenness. Achebe is however careful to vindicate Ezeulu's position in this controversy, showing that it was as he said, 'the hand of *Ekwensu'* (23).

Ezeulu narrates elaborately in mythic terms how the four days of the week were founded. Myth is an interpretation of social reality. So in this poetic narration, Ezeulu is elaborating on the spiritual eminence of Ulu and his Priest. The occasion of the Pumpkin Leaves Festival when the people cleanse themselves for the new planting season also offers them an opportunity to affirm their spiritual union. In this high festive event, the people's response is both individual and communal. Ugoye's prayer, for instance, is both a personal and universal index of their participation, as they demonstrate their spiritual unity.

Ezeulu also celebrates the traditional days of the week. This myth of the coming of the days of the week enacts the cementing of the tribes as their representative confronted danger before he became established as his people's priest. Ezeulu, therefore, is celebrating the sacredness of the tribal union that forms Umuaro. The religious temperament of the women is also made manifest in their invocation to the moon, for as soon as the moon appears, 'they are already thinking of the blessings or evil omen which it can bring' (Ngara 1982, 60). And so Achebe works out the tribal destiny of the people in terms of the spiritual.

Ezeulu is put in confrontation with a worldly opponent, Obgbuefi Nwaka of Ummuneora, proxy of the High Priest of Idemili. Nwaka opposes Ezeulu effectively because Ezeulu is only a spiritual leader. In this antagonism, we are made to see that there is a valid traditional system, including the religious that colonialism would subvert. Also, Nwodika's son argues for the race for the white man's money. But Ezeulu, unlike the economic man sees more the values that are non-economic. And so his choices supersede the economic argument. This tendency to argue more in terms of the spiritual

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probably contributes to the misunderstanding between him and his people; a point which seems to be in line with Akwanya's observation that the relationship between the deity and his worshippers is always a 'difficult' one for apart from the fact that the demands of the people are there all the time and they expect the gods not to let them down but bow to their human needs, the gods and their representatives see things more in terms of the eternal; the unchanging. Earlier, Nwaka had 'threatened Ulu by reminding him of the fate of another deity that failed his people' (39). This antagonism between Nwaka and Ezeulu continues till the end of the novel.

Captain Winterbottom is under directives to appoint a warrant chief for Umuaro. The warrant chieftaincy system is a type of indirect rule and allows the colonizer to rule the colonized through appointed indigenous chiefs. Winterbottom therefore decides that Ezeulu is just the man for the job, having impressed him with his integrity and courage in the Okperi/Umuaro land dispute. Also Winterbottom thinks that Ezeulu (whose name he mistakenly interprets to mean 'King of Ulu'), already has the authority of a priest-king over his people (Palmer 1979, 85-86). And so he sends for Ezeulu. However, Ezeulu refuses to go saying that the Priest of Ulu does not normally leave his hut and that the white man must come to him if he wants to see him, thereby affirming not only the dignity, authenticity and autonomy of traditional life but also that the only superior authority he will recognise is that of his god, Ulu. As Palmer further points out, his great dignity and pride derive partly from the consciousness of his own worth and the strength of his institutions.

Also when Clarke offers Ezeulu the role of warrant chief, Ezeulu's answer is a symbolic refusal: 'Tell the white man that Ezeulu cannot be anybody's chief except Ulu' (175). As Akwanya and Anohu observe, the white man wants to use Ezeulu to help him project the colonial system; 'to be the spear-head and agent of

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penetration ... of Umuaro traditional system' (2001, 56). Therefore, Ezeulu's rejection of the offer is significant: it is a rejection of imperialism and an assertion of the values Ezeulu as Chief Priest represents. The warrant chieftaincy system is not a democratic institution. The warrant chief held his power at the pleasure of the colonizer and is, therefore, the right-hand man to imperialism and the subjugation of a people by external power. Therefore, by rejecting it, Ezeulu affirms and asserts the supremacy of the world of spirits. In Emenyonu's words, Ezeulu is 'keeping with his inalienable commitment to Ulu'; 'adhering to the letter of his religious faith' (1978, 136-137).

Winterbottom however orders Ezeulu to be arrested and is subsequently imprisoned. This ushers in the chain of events which lead to the disaster at the end of the novel. First, Winterbottom, by getting Ezeulu arrested, causes him to break a sacred custom which forbids the Priest of Ulu to travel far from his hut. Also by trying to turn Ulu's Chief Priest into 'another person's chief', Winterbottom has tried to unseat Ulu, an act which Ezeulu's enemies attempted some years before. But most importantly, Winterbottom has brought about a complication in the most sacred duty of Ezeulu's office – the eating of the sacred yams used to mark the calendar year – by imprisoning him for thirty-two days.

And so as the people continue to wait anxiously for the announcement of the date of the New Yam Festival, a delegation of the elders of the land is sent to Ezeulu to appeal to him to change his mind and eat the remaining sacred yams so they could harvest their crops. However, Ezeulu remains resolute in his decision not to do so. As far as he is concerned, the elders were 'defying his god', just as Winterbottom had done. They were 'treating a serious matter lightly and without adequate respect to Ulu' (Emenyonu 1978, 140). He maintains that what might seem like a wilful non-co-operation 'is not my doing'. Ezeulu continues: 'You cannot say: do

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what is not done and we shall take the blame. I am the Chief Priest of Ulu and what I have told you is his will not mine' (261).

Ezeulu, therefore, remains adamant in his resolve not to eat the remaining sacred yams, believing as always that he is doing the will of Ulu and that with Ulu by his side, no force can be too strong for him to overcome. However, as the people look desperately on without any sign that the date of the New Yam Festival would be announced soon, they begin to harvest their crops in the name of the Christian God and as the novel closes ironically, the reader is forced to ask whether the New Order has replaced the Old or Ulu has simply taken revenge on his Chief Priest.

In the essay, ' The Role of the Writer in a New Nation', Achebe advises that the writer must strive to do an objective portrayal of his society and resist the temptation of idealizing the past by selecting only those facts which flatter him, that if the writer succumbs to the temptation of extolling the past and pretending that the bad never existed, he would not only have branded himself as an untrustworthy witness but that both his personal integrity and his integrity as an artist would have been called into question. In his words: 'the credibility of the world he is attempting to recreate will be called into question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts' (1964, 158), for we 'cannot pretend that our past was one long technicolour idyll' but that like other people's pasts, it had its 'good as well as its bad sides' (158).

Achebe achieves this objectivity and impartiality in the novel so that even with the emphasis on colonialism, the interpretation of the irony at the end of the novel is left open-ended, with Achebe seeming to suggest that a combination of factors such as fate ('forces outside human compass') and both the individual's and society's faults accounted for the collapse of the Old Order. According to him, 'the society itself was already heading towards destruction ... somebody showed them the way. A conflict between

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two brothers enables a stranger to reap their harvest' (Egejuru 1980, 158).

Thus, even though 'Europe' in Achebe's words 'has a lot of blame' in the collapse, 'there were', in his view, 'internal problems and tensions' that made Umuaro's unity collapse whereby the coloniser capitalized on it. Achebe therefore seeks to portray 'neither moral absolutes nor a fatalistic inevitability' (Wikipedia 2014, 17). This perspective seems to be reflected in a 1972 interview in which Achebe had said: 'I never will take the stand that the Old must win or that the New must win. The point is that no single truth satisfied me – and this is well founded in the Ibo world view. No single idea can be totally correct' (Lindfors 1982, 101-102). In 1996, he reiterated: 'belief in either radicalism or orthodoxy is too simplified a way of viewing things ... Evil is never evil; goodness on the other hand, is often tainted with selfishness' (Mezu 2006, 229). This view seems again re-echoed in the words of Ikem in *Anthills of the Savannah* when he says: 'whatever you are is never enough; you must find a way to accept something, however small, from the other to make you whole and to save you from the mortal sin of righteousness and extremism' (Mezu, 132).

Achebe has insisted on this point so well that in the response which he wrote to John Updike's letter in which the latter had expressed surprised admiration for the sudden downfall of Ezeulu, praising Achebe for the courage to write 'an ending few Western novelists would have contrived', Achebe had said that the 'individualistic hero was rare in African literature, given its roots in communal living and the degree to which characters are 'subject to non-human forces in the universe' (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 2000, 106). Moreover, 'no man however great can win judgement against his clan' (*Arrow of God* 1964, 131).

However, even though the Old Order collapses, the novel focuses not on the collapse but on a rich and pulsating life; a life of spiritual union with the temporal; a life where spiritual values are

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given pre-eminence and where the gods hold a supreme place in the affairs of men. As seen in the novel, no major enterprise is undertaken without first attempting to find out the will of the gods. As aptly summarized by Eustace Palmer, the religious system involved:

> a complex hierarchy of gods and deities, major and minor, ranging from the personal god or chi, through the central spirits and clan deities, to the major national gods. The chi or personal god ... ensured the individual's protection and was in a way responsible for his destiny. The spirits of the ancestors not only acted as mediators between man and god but also occasionally took a hand in deciding human destiny; they could show their pleasure or displeasure with their descendants by making them prosper or sending them misfortunes. An Ibo man's shrine contained wooden carvings which were the symbols of his ancestral spirits and he had to pray to them and worship them daily with sacrifices. Then there were the village and clan deities like Idemili, Udo, Ogwugwu and Ulu, who were the immediate protectors of the village or clan, and the major gods – Amadioha, the god of thunder and of the sky; Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility, the ultimate judge of morality and conduct; Ojukwu the god who controlled the disease of smallpox; and Ifejioku, the god of yams. Above them all was the greatest: Chukwu (1979, 65).

Palmer continues that in worshipping wooden representations of these gods, the Igbo people, far from indulging in idolatry 'were merely manifesting the belief similar to the Christian theory of the omnipresence of God, that they were present in all aspects of creation through which they could speak to their people' (65). Therefore, to the 'sceptical Christians', Palmer maintains:

> the Ibo man, like the Christian counterpart also believes in the supreme god, Chukwu, only he felt that Chukwu's might prevented him from being approached except through

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> middlemen or lesser gods. Like all other religions, this elaborate religious system was designed to explain the mysteries of a seemingly irrational and frightening world and to provide sanctions for good behaviour. Adherence to its dictates therefore meant a stable society in which the norms were respected. In both *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart*, we see the powerful belief that the clan should not go to war unless its case was clear and just, for it could not otherwise count on the support of its deity.... A man could never swear by his chi or his Ikenga if he knew his cause was not just; no one would risk the wrath of Ojukwu or the thunder of Amadioha (65-66).

The fear of the gods, therefore, helped to maintain law and order in the society. As earlier observed, many of the customs were originally necessitated by the fear of the gods and of the unknown forces of evil. And so, quite contrary to the assertions of some Europeans missionaries who tagged Africa as pagan, these societies were actually more religious than some Western countries at the time Achebe wrote. Ezeulu, remains unflinching in his trust in his god and as inseparable from his duties as Ulu is from Umuaro, and this, according to Emenyonu – devotion to the gods – is 'the unquestioned sign of true religion even when this involves human sacrifice or ritual murder performed in obedience to oracular prescriptions (1978, xvii – xiiii).

Conclusion

Arrow of God, thus, demonstrates the supremacy of the world of spirits; the paramountcy of religious beliefs in the life of the people of Umuaro. As seen in the novel, not only does Ezeulu remain unshakeable in his confidence in his god, Ulu, but no major enterprise is undertaken without first attempting to find out the will of the gods. Earlier, we had seen the homicide as organised around *ikenga,* a belief in the spirit of the ancestors that makes Umuaro to appreciate the death of Akukalia. And so, despite the

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great importance attached to achievement as evident in *Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God* demonstrates that an even greater premium is placed on the spiritual dimension of life. In their enclosed order, there is unquestioned loyalty to the spiritual so that in important decision-making, Ulu it is that makes the choices. The novel closes ironically. However, Achebe concentrates not on the downfall, but on Umuaro's spiritual life as satisfying. It is possible that Ezeulu wanted to punish the people but the story emphasizes that it is Ulu's decision, since in this order, there is an unconditional fealty to the world of spirits; a quality which Achebe laments as lacking in the new nations which have embraced 'materialism' and 'thrown away spirituality which should keep it in check' (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 2000,102).

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