

## From Heroism to Madness: Tragic Injustice in *Arrow of God*

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### **Abstract**

This paper, while locating Ezeulu's tragic experience within the framework of Aristotelian conception of tragedy, argues that Ezeulu's descent from heroism to madness in *Arrow of God* hinges less on his stubbornness and failure to recognize that no man can defeat his kinsmen and their gods in one fight but more on the tragic injustice arising from the crack in his armour. Approaching the work as a tragedy, the paper examines Ezeulu's heroic capabilities embodied in his truthfulness, fearlessness, and firmness, all of which are juxtaposed with the tragic trials that culminate in his lunacy. The final realisation that the deity which he has served with great devotion at personal peril has connived with the same people whose burden of guilt he has borne on his wide back for many years, to humiliate him is the height of tragic injustice. It is this sense of utter solitude and the apparent meaninglessness of his immense powers that drive him mad. This paper suggests that given the greatness of soul and the unbending devotion with which he has approached his priestly vocation, his humiliation and the terror which finally tears him apart become appalling. The paper concludes that Ezeulu, constrained by the movement of necessity, speaks and acts in the language of the gods. He is compelled to be the arrow; to shoot the arrow and to catch the arrow in his own wide chest. If Ezeulu learns this fact at the

final moment of his humiliation, then his destruction becomes at once defeat and victory, submission and transcendence.

### **Introduction**

Ezeulu's tragic heroism can be accounted for by Aristotle's theory of tragedy. Aristotle talks about the enormous suffering and violent action that take place in tragedy and identifies the fundamental tragic emotions as terror and pity. For him, the structure of a tragic plot must include a hero who has distinguished himself in some significant way. Again, in his theory of modes, Northrop Frye classifies fictions by 'the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same' (32). According to this classification,

If this individual through his capabilities, is superior in kind both to other men and to the environment of other men, the hero is a divine being, and the story about him will be a myth in the common sense of a story about a god. If superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance... If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader (33).

This last hero, 'superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment' has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than other characters, but what he does is subject to the order of nature. This is the hero of the high mimetic mode, of most epics and tragedies, and is 'primarily the kind of hero that Aristotle had in mind' (*Anatomy* 33). Frye's association of the heroic individual with the possession of power, authority and passions is crucial in this reflection on Ezeulu's individuality which also connects him to Nietzsche's *Overman*, *the Ubermensch* or *the Superman* or the 'titanically striving individual' who struggles because he must. According to Frye, 'this hero is often 'socially aggressive and his social impact is revolutionary' (6). The *Overman*

spirit which is realized when the superior individual has the courage to trans-value all values is accessible in the Overman myth in which Nietzsche proposes the will to live joyously with uncertainty, ambiguity and multiplicity. For him then, the measure of this character's strength is 'to be able to live under *inverse* valuations and to want them eternally again' (339).

### **Misunderstanding Ezeulu's Tragic Dilemma**

In very significant ways, Ezeulu's tragedy transcends the traditional tragic mode. In the words of Virginia Ola,

In his search for the meaning of tragedy through the destiny of Ezeulu, Achebe traversed the Aristotelian requirements of greatness of a hero, his transition from happiness to disaster; character domination by hamartia; and the Elizabethan celebration of revenge, murder, intrigue and carnage, to find the ultimate meaning of tragedy (97).

Ezeulu's heroism and final defeat is striking in the same measure as the complex fatality of Oedipus who in the order of things has been ordained to fail. Many critics have, strangely concentrated on Ezeulu's obduracy as the major cause of his failure and have supported their claim with the case in the novel that no man no matter how highly placed can win a case against his clan. Akachi Ezeigbo, for instance, argues that Ezeulu's tragedy is 'his mental and psychological make-up. He combines in himself certain irreconcilable traits – integrity and pride; intelligence and imprudence; and aggression and endurance. These traits find it difficult to co-exist harmoniously in Ezeulu' (3). She further notes that it is within these contradictions that his tragic flaw is located. But Ezeulu is cast in the mode in which all these are to be made possible. And for Charles Nnolim also, Ezeulu fails as a leader as a result of his stubbornness and lack of tact:

The problem with Ezeulu is that he lacks tact; he has a poorly developed political instinct; and he lacks a proper sense of

history as he strains after the gnat of personal power, swallowing in the process the camel of mass disaffection. He thus fails himself and fails Umuaro because he chooses to be blind to the limitations of his power, forgetting that Ulu whose high priest he is, is not a nature god but god over Umuaro by convention and compromise and can only retain its power by adjusting to the demands of the times (172).

These modes of reflection seem to overlook the precariousness of Ezeulu's position as chief priest and the possible danger of his going contrary to the ritual ordinance. Ezeulu expresses this fear when the ten chiefs from all Umuaro suggest that he violate the custom by eating up the remaining yams in order to pave way for the yam harvest:

You have spoken well. But what you ask me to do is not done. Those yams are not food and a man does not eat them because he is hungry. You are asking me to eat death (207).

It is obvious that although Ezeulu has threatened a revenge on Umuaro by refusing to eat the sacred yams, the scope of the revenge is tied to his unwillingness to risk his own life by eating more than one yam in a month, which amounts to eating his own 'death.' The fundamental question is: what is the guarantee that Ulu would not punish Ezeulu in the event of his breaking the norm? The fact of tragic injustice in the novel is that he is caged from the wake of time and there is hardly anything he can do about that. The gods may take an unfair decision and use human beings to execute it. This is why Ezeulu tells the council of chiefs:

I am the chief Priest of Ulu and what I have told you is his will not mine. Do not forget that I too have yam fields and that my children, my kinsmen and my friends – yourselves among them – have also planted yams. It could not be my wish to ruin all these people. It could not be my wish to make the smallest man in Umuaro suffer. But this is not my doing. The gods sometimes use us as a whip (208).

For as we are told, his family is the worst hit by the ensuing famine. Other families, at the peak of the famine help themselves with yams grown in the homesteads and gradually the boundary between the main fields and the homesteads become difficult to draw. But Ezeulu's household does not have such a leeway. Thus, as Virginia Ola argues,

A slightly different approach to the profound truth of this work is to presuppose that the tragedy of Ezeulu is far from being about the punishment of an arrogant and impressive looking fetish priest ... crushed by a stronger communal and supernatural force for daring to stand against his community; and to assert that it is rather an elaborate fictional-cum-dramatic dirge on the fall of the classic prophet unrecognised and ultimately rejected by a blind and arrogant people (96).

It is evident in the novel, as Ezeulu points out to the Court Messenger that 'no matter how many spirits plotted a man's death it would come to nothing unless his personal god took a hand in the deliberation' (136). Ezeulu's personal god has participated in devising for him an intractable destiny which sets up a chain of catastrophes. He tells his friend, Akuebue:

I have my own way and I shall follow it. I can see things where other men are blind. That is why I am Known and at the same time Unknowable. You are my friend and you know whether I am a thief or a murderer or an honest man. But you cannot know the Thing which beats the drum to which Ezeulu dances. I can see tomorrow; that is why I can tell Umuaro: *come out from this because there is death there or do this because there is profit in it* (132).

Thus the best form of reading must be 'alive to the verbal signposts which the writer has planted along the path to his profound intentions' (Irele 14).

To be sure, Ezeulu is a brave man, steadfast in thought and action and abhors mediocrity. He rules his polygamous family with

firmness. He is never swayed by other peoples' positions but maintains his own sense of judgment despite the grave consequences. He remains the chief priest of Ulu, a god created by the when the six villages of Umuaro united to withstand the Abam slave raiders. As the chief priest, Ezeulu is responsible for safeguarding the traditions and rituals of the people. It is his function, for instance, to watch each month for the new moon. He eats a sacred yam and beats the ogene to mark the beginning of each new month. Only the chief priest can name the day for the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves or for the New Yam Feast, which ushers in the yam harvest. Ezeulu considers himself 'merely a watchman' (3) for Ulu. According to the narrative voice, 'his power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his' (3). But Ezeulu is also endowed with hubris which is a chink in his armour. It is beyond him to act differently in spite of this crack which makes him to imagine the possibility of acting beyond the boundary approved by the community's ritual ordinances. As Lewis Nkosi notes, 'Achebe is interested in the investigation of this power and how a priest determines the gods' decrees' ('Interview with Lewis Nkosi' 21). But hubris which is inscribed in him for being who he is does not go unpunished. According to Camus:

There is tragedy when man in pride (or even in stupidity as in Ajax's case) battles with the divine order, personified by a god or incarnated in society. And the more legitimate the rebellion, and the more necessary this order, the greater the tragedy will be (17).

It is the gods who inscribe the sin of excess in the character and it is the same gods that punish him. Richard B. Sewall argues that, Hubris is not sin. It is the mysterious dynamic of all tragic action, dangerous because it involves a challenge to the powers that be, but not morally good or bad. It may lead to destruction- indeed, it so often has that the folk will have none of it; but without it, no man acts or suffers or learns. And it is the

distinctive mark of the hero ... (Sewall 36-7; Akwanya, *Discourse Analysis* 29-30).

Tragedy may make certain characteristic affirmations, as well as denials, 'about the cosmos and man's relation to it; the nature of the individual and his relation to himself; the individual in society' (Sewall 166). Hence, the tragic character always protests, and puts himself against something, or in a position that forces him to go up against whatever would frustrate him. He accepts his situation and goes through a phase Sewall calls the character's 'perception.' Thus, we see that Ezeulu's career as a tragic hero must be accounted to follow the movement of necessity, a situation that is beyond his control. Akwanya agrees that 'hubris needn't be a moral fault in the strict sense of the word' (30). As Kerkgaard asserts, 'the true sorrow consequently requires an element of guilt, the true tragic pain an element of innocence; the true tragic sorrow requires an element of transparency, the true tragic pain an element of obscurity' (in Dukore 551; Ola 98). If Ezeulu's defeat arises from his overriding desire, it is already inscribed in his career as a tragic individual. Like all tragic heroes, he is created lame. This is a situation that is affirmed in the festivals of Dionysus and all other vegetation gods. According to Murray,

The story of (the) Year-god is always the same: he is born a miraculous child, he grows in beauty and strength, he conquers, he wins his bride, he commits the sin of hubris or excess, he transgresses the law, and thereafter must of necessity suffer defeat, and die. Thus the ritual of Dionysus sees life in a tragic pattern. It is the story of these vegetation gods: the story of the Sun, the Day, and the Year: it is the story of all life: of flower and tree, of bird and beast, of men and cities. All begin in beauty and frailness, grow in strength, grow too strong or too proud, and they inevitably dwindle and die. If we ask why they die, the answer, it seemed to the Ancients, must be that they die

because in some sense or other they have transgressed or sinned (Murray 6).

Thus Ezeulu is incapable of choosing not to be a victim or what Frye describes as 'institutional scape-goat.' Frye notes that the 'pharmakos' is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes ... He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence' (41). His experience is already part of the constitution of things. When Cadmon upbraids Dionysus for his extremism, the god makes riposte that his father 'Zeus ordained it all from the beginning' (quoted in Eagleton, *Holy Terror* 25). It is in this sense that Ezeulu is seen as 'an instrument of fate - the blind accessory of a process that culminates not only in his own undoing, but in the fall of the gods of the land' (Irele 177).

In the flashback that explains the cause of the conflict between Ezeulu and Nwaka, two very strong figures in Umuaro five years before, Nwaka is shown to be a prosperous man and a supporter of Ezidemili, the chief priest of the god, Idemili. The initial clash between the two men is over a land dispute between Umuaro and the nearby village of Okperi. Ezeulu, as a man of justice, tries without success to persuade his Umuaro kinsmen not to take war to Okperi over a portion of land that belongs to Okperi. He gives them the information the way he has learnt it from his father:

I know, my father said this to me that when our village first came here to live the land belonged to Okperi. It was Okperi who gave us a piece of their land to live in. They also gave us their deities - their Udo and Ogwugwu... this is the story as I heard it from my father. If you choose to fight a man for a piece of land that belongs to him, I shall have no hand in it (15).

Against the oratorical prowess of Chief Nwaka, Ezeulu struggles in vain to prevail on his people not to engage in an unjust war. Nwaka carries the day and leads the group of villagers who want to go to



war against Okperi. Ezeulu later testifies on Government Hill that the people of Umuaro have no claim to Okperi land, an objective witness that impresses Captain Winterbottom. Thus when the war between the two communities is fought and lost by Umuaro, enmity intensifies for Ezeulu among his townsmen. But as the chief priest of Ulu, Ezeulu cannot bear false witness in a land dispute. He remains resolute in the defence of truth, an action that pits him against Nwaka and most of his kinsmen. Ezeulu's sin in this instance is his refusal to play along the path of dishonesty and falsehood in order to be a good man in the eyes of his kinsmen. Oforka tells Ezeulu that no king, no matter how highly placed in the egalitarian community in which Ezeulu lives enjoys overwhelming importance and attraction in the eyes of his kinsmen: 'no man however great was greater than his people; that no man ever won judgement against his clan' (287). But Ezeulu would never concede to the caprices of a foolish majority. The fact is that it is Nwaka who misleads his people with his show of wealth and oratory. He leads them to an unjust war that ends in shame and defeat and turns back to blame Ezeulu. He succeeds in discrediting Ezeulu through his self glorification. At each gathering, he makes it a point of duty to stand against Ezeulu's position, and most often recasts the latter's statements in order to ridicule him. During the meeting to discuss the white man's invitation to Okperi, Nwaka says:

If Ezeulu is telling us that he is tired of the white man's friendship, our advice to him should be: *you tied the knot, you should also know how to undo it. You passed the shit that is smelling; you should carry it away* (144).

These infuriating remarks expectedly generate disaffection. And it is scandalous for Nwaka to speak very ill of a chief priest who bears the destiny of the land on his back. In the annual ritual of the Pumpkin Leaves, Ezeulu performs the purification rites as thousands of Umuaro women symbolically hurl at him the evils and misfortunes of their households in the form of pumpkin leaves for

burial at Ulu's shrine. This shows the sacredness and the deep spiritual responsibility of office and he who carries out this function ought to be revered.

Indeed when we read that 'Ezeulu's ... fault was that he expected everyone – his wives, his kinsmen, his children, his friends and even his enemies – to think and act like him' (70), it is apparent that Ezeulu is equally misunderstood by the man who created him. Aristotle sees tragic extremism as a failure to find the way of moderation leading in downfall. However, in contrast to Aristotle, Nietzsche feels that this extremism is 'the sole justification for the hero's existence as one who possesses the courage to live dangerously, to risk all in order to gain all' (*The Birth of Tragedy* 5). That is to say, Ezeulu resembles the Nietzschean hero who is endowed with the capacity to transvalue all values:

Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real. ..If he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival – no planting and no reaping. But could he refuse? No Chief Priest had ever refused. So it could not be done. He would not dare (3).

According to the narrator, 'Ezeulu was stung to anger by this as though his enemy had spoken it' and in an imaginary response to this taunting enemy, Ezeulu commands:

'Take away that word dare... Yes I say take it away. No man in all Umuaro can stand up and say that I dare not. The woman who will bear the man who will say it has not been born yet' (3-4).

Ezeulu marvels at the immensity of his power. He sees the accurate measurement of time and uncompromising adherence to the law guiding the sacred eating of the yam as what had to be done. And for him also, doing what had to be done is a fundamental requirement of his office as Ulu's chief priest. He is the only man endowed with the quality of soul to do that which ought to be done. His actions depict him as a man that is beyond all other men.

In short, he is described as a match to his fate, an equivalent of Sophocles' 'the first of men' or 'the more than man' (*Oedipus the King* 29-34).

By refusing to announce the feast, the yams cannot be harvested and they rot in the fields, a situation that brings famine in the land. Ezeulu tells his people: 'You all know our custom ... I only call a new festival when there is only one yam left from the last. Today I have three yams and so I know that the time has not come' (207). He explains his helplessness by informing his kinsmen that though he is aware that he is punishing and hurting all of them including himself, he is to be likened to the arrow in the bow of Ulu. Thus as Ola affirms, 'despite the recognisable tinge of revenge in the episodes of the new yams the total outcome assumes the working out in the lives of these men, especially the hero, of a rigorous fatality that transcends their ability to comprehend or to arrest its pre-ordained course (101). And because justice can be as lunatic as revenge, the ways of the gods, blind as they are, seem to rebuke his actions. Critics like Akachi Ezeigbo argue differently that,

He (Ezeulu) is going beyond the boundary of good sense or rationality and heading for disaster as events will later show. He forgets he is only the Chief Priest of Ulu and arrogates more powers to himself. He creates a situation whereby he becomes the one and only person to decide the fate of a whole clan (*Literary Review*, April 5 2014. n/p).

It is note-worthy, however that Ezeulu does not refuse the white man's invitation out of his feeling of self-importance. He does so because of the Court messenger's insolence while addressing him. Between Ezeulu and his visiting friend, Akuebue, the messenger arrogantly asks in the manner of the white man: 'which one of you is called Ezeulu?' (137) When his impropriety is made clear to him, he does not feel any remorse but explains in a matter of fact:

Do not take my question amiss. The white man has his own way of doing things. Before he does anything to you he will first ask you your name and the answer must come from your own lips (137).

Ezeulu in his great wisdom takes the insults calmly, restraining his son Obika who is infuriated beyond consolation that a boy from Umuru, a Court Messenger is masquerading himself as a white man. He tells the Messenger: 'if you have any grain of sense in your belly, you will know that you are not in the house of the white man but in Umuro in the house of the Chief Priest of Ulu' (138). When finally he is asked to deliver his message, he says arrogantly again: 'Yes, your friend Wintabota' (he mouthed the name in the ignorant fashion of his hearers) 'has ordered you to appear before him tomorrow morning' (138). It is to be expected what Ezeulu's response to this would be: 'you must first return, however, and tell your white man that Ezeulu does not leave his hut. If he wants to see me, he must come here. Nwodika's son who showed you the way can also show him' (139).

#### **Between a Devoted Chief Priest and a Malevolent Deity**

Ezeulu proves that he is a brave 'man who never runs away from trouble' (145). When he is summoned to Okperi to Government Hill for a meeting with Winterbottom who wants to make him a 'puppet' chief, he turns down the offer. Ezeulu's invitation by the white man is exploited by his enemy, Nwaka who draws the kinsmen's attention to Ezeulu's unwholesome friendship with the white men that are taking over the land. He says mockingly: 'now it is not clear to me whether it is wrong for a man to ask his friend to visit him' (143). But Ezeulu shows that he can handle the situation by insisting on going to confront Winterbottom all alone. He tells them that he is equal to the task before him. In his detention caused by his premeditated delay in his departure to Okperi, Ezeulu, to the astonishment of the Assistant District Officer Clarke and most other

people, declines to be a white man's chief: 'tell the white man that Ezeulu will not be anybody's chief except Ulu' (175). This action which compels respect for him enables him to reach catharsis because through it he unburdens his heart of anger and indignation. By his refusal, Ezeulu demonstrates his commitment and steadfastness to serve only Ulu and the Umuaro as a priest with undivided loyalty. Winterbottom has a good intention for him, which is compared to 'a morsel which fortune had placed in his mouth' (175) but he spits it out. Although this action of his angers the British administration, and they detain him for two more months, it is an action that elevates him in the eyes of his people who now celebrate him as a hero, the only one to have subdued the white man himself. It signifies too that Ezeulu is not power hungry. This is a rare fit for which most of his kinsmen pay him much tribute on his arrival to Umuaro. In his usual way, Nwaka, Ezeulu's adversary misrepresents this show of heroism in the battle with the white man. He dismisses Ezeulu's rejection of the lofty offer as a manifestation of the madness he must have inherited from his mother (176). Yet, other people now recognise Ezeulu as the figure of Lear, a man more sinned against than sinning.

In their arrogance and confusion, the Umuaro people become divided in their loyalty between Ulu and the survival of the community. While this dilemma rages on among a starving people, Ezeulu's son Obika dies suddenly after performing as Ogbazulobodo, the night spirit, in a ritual for Amalu's funeral. The people take Obika's demise as an indication that Ulu had either reprimanded or dumped his priest and 'that no man however great was greater than his people; that no one ever won judgment against his clan' (230). Umuaro and its leaders vent their anger on Ezeulu, accusing him of a smack of strange stiff-neckedness, the type associated with the career of such other literary figures as Sophocles' Antigone, Shakespeare's Julius Caesar and Shylock. But it is obvious that Ezeulu acts under a force that is beyond his

control. In the novel's final page, the narrator indicates that if it is true that the god has taken sides with the people to destroy his priest, then Ulu had chosen a dangerous time to uphold that truth for in destroying his priest he had also brought disaster on himself, like the lizard in the fable who ruined his mother's burial by his own hand (230).

Ulu as a deity is crafty, implacable, vindictive, and bottomlessly malevolent in destroying Ezeulu. It does not only endorse Ezeulu's destruction, but seems to revel in it. The deity grows fat on Ezeulu as victim and scapegoat, dumps him as chief priest during his battle with his kinsmen, chides him for contemplating reconciliation with Umuaro and finally deserts him in a state of utter aloneness. The narrator, like Ezeulu himself is worried about the crazed excess of this injustice visited on a man who has served his deity with such passionate devotion. Ezeulu weeps for the mercilessness of this god and seems to remind it that 'deities should rise above human vindictiveness' (Eagleton18). In short, Ulu, like Dionysus in its orgiastic frenzy, turns on its own chief priest and tears him apart. The terror that is unleashed on its priest, in the words of Eagleton, teaches us:

the precariousness and fragility of existence, its enigmatic origins, its unthinkable ambivalences, the extent to which we are darkly opaque to ourselves.... But it must not do so to the point where we are crushed by its chastisements, humiliated rather than chastened, plunged into an abysmal lack of self-esteem, and thus cease to function as responsible citizens at all (16).

In its attempt to destroy its priest, Ulu destroys itself. Because Ulu seems to have failed them, the people of Umuaro turn to Christianity, harvesting the yams and taking a sacrificial offering to Mr. Goodcountry who receives them with open arms. Ezeulu is the representation and the spokesperson of Ulu. In fact, Ulu is in him

and whatever word he utters has been planted in his tongue by Ulu. Therefore, Akuebue's in-law's assertion that 'a priest like Ezeulu leads a god to destroy himself' is however counteracted by Akuebue's own response that 'a god like Ulu leads a priest to destroy himself' (213). And the fact that 'the chief priest is not even permitted a change of his error of judgment and contemplation of revenge is part of the fatal mechanics of the work' (Ola 103). This is tragic injustice that imperils not just Ezeulu and the deity but the entire community.

### **Conclusion**

Ezeulu's descent from heroism to madness in this novel therefore hinges less on his failure to recognize the basic fact of the Achebean philosophy that no man, no matter how strong can defeat his kinsmen and their gods in one fight but more on tragic injustice. And the attempt to transcend this destiny ends in defeat. In his Dionysian image and, revelling in a riot of perversity, Ulu is 'both autocrat and anarchist, god and rebel, judge and outlaw' (Eagleton 24). If there is a feeling of estrangement with that power inherent in him which is powerlessness, there is a feeling of identity with his heroic spirit. We feel for him because his calamities recall us to our own finitude. If we affirm our solidarity with this mutilated figure, which is what Aristotle calls pity, we are also appalled by the terror which tears him apart, which is what Aristotle calls fear. Through Ezeulu's suffering, we act out a symbolic openness to our own mortality; yet because it is he that suffers not us, this humility is laced with a triumphant sense of immortality. Ezeulu's tragic experience demonstrates that in his confrontation with the movement of necessity, he speaks and acts in the language of the gods. He is compelled to be the arrow; the shooter of the arrow and the victim who must catch the arrow in his own wide chest. If Ezeulu learns this fact at the final moment of his humiliation, then

his destruction becomes at once defeat and victory, submission and transcendence.

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