

‘A Source for *Arrow of God*:’ Matters Arising

Charles E. Nnolim, *NNOM*
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education
Port Harcourt

When ‘A Source for *Arrow of God*’ was published as a lead article by *Research in African Literatures* (Volume 8, No. 1, Spring 1977), it caused a stir among literary critics, some of them demanding proofs. Professor Bernth Lindfors, editor of *Research in African Literatures*, before publishing the article wrote me (January 29, 1976):

I think you have done a fine piece of detective work and I am eager to publish your essay on *Arrow of God*. Although our Fall 1976 issue is now fairly full, I might be able to squeeze it in there, and if not, we will use it as a lead article in our Spring 1977 number I think the article is fine as it stands. You lay all the cards on the table, and I think you have a very persuasive case.

To me, because the editor, Professor Lindfors, wanted proof of my claims, he added subtly in his letter:

I intend to expand your reference to the publisher of this booklet to include the address so readers of *Research in African Literatures* will be able to order it to check your surprising (but well-justified) claims.

Eldred Durosimi Jones, founding editor of *African Literature Today* (currently edited by Ernest Emenyonu) on reading ‘A Source for *Arrow of God*’ wrote me personally (July 18, 1977).

I was clearing my desk before taking a short holiday when I casually opened the latest number of *Research in African Literatures* and caught sight of the title of your article. The moment I read the first few lines I knew I was looking at a very

important article. I read it straight through quite fascinated with the result that my desk is still uncleared but I am much enlightened. Your article does open new paths of Achebe criticism. Your North's Plutarch/Shakespeare analogy was most apt. I do hope the right conclusions will be drawn as you indicated that Achebe is still a gifted writer of fiction and like many others drew inspiration from various sources (your discovery of a written source is a literary coup). What I found curious is that Achebe did not acknowledge the source which he obviously studied and whose use does him no injury.

After the publication of 'A Source for *Arrow of God* in 1977, and the reactions which followed it, continuing research revealed that Simon Nnolim in *The History of Umuchu* misspelt the name of the District Commissioner who imprisoned Ezeagu Uchu (Achebe's Ezeulu) in 1913. Although Nnolim spelled his name as Lotain, the correct spelling, according to the eminent historian A.E. Afigbo, is J.G. Lawton. In an enlightening article entitled 'Chief Igwegbe Odum: the Omenuko of History' (*Nigeria Magazine*, No. 90, 1966), A.E. Afigbo gave more details of the events of 1913 after the release of Ezeagu Uchu and the appointment of Omenuko to the paramount chieftaincy of Ajalli. Umuchu and Arondizuogu where Chief Igwegbe Odum hailed from were under the same administrative unit. My letter to the editor (reproduced below will be of interest to the general reader): This letter to the editor was published in *Research in African Literatures* (Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring, 1984, pp. 148-150).

It reads:

Sir,

Much controversy and comment have been generated by my article, 'A Source for *Arrow of God*' (*Research in African Literatures*, 8 (1977), 1-26). I will not go into any of these controversies here, since I believe that the article still speaks for itself. Although the editor of RAL had, in an earlier letter, invited me to comment

on some of the responses to my article and although Achebe in several interviews and public lectures has made both direct and oblique references to me and to that article (to me especially as doing harm to his image as a writer, although I think the article has advanced Achebe studies considerably and renewed interest in the study of *Arrow of God*), the present letter is intended to draw attention to an error in spelling that distorts history and to correct that error for the sake of historical accuracy.

Further research has revealed that in *The History of Umuchu*, S.A. Nnolim misspelled the name of the district commissioner who imprisoned Ezeagu Uchu (Achebe's prototype for Ezeulu) in 1913. An enlightening article by A.E. Afigbo entitled 'Chief Igwegbe Odum: the Omenuko of History' (*Nigeria Magazine*, No. 90 [1966], 222-231) reveals that the district commissioner who was in charge of the Awka District in 1913 was J.G. Lawton, not Lotain, as spelled by Nnolim in *The History of Umuchu*.

According to Afigbo (p. 226 ff), Lawton was acting district commissioner of Awka, having just replaced J.B. Gardiner. As Afigbo narrates it, it was Lawton who wrote the resident officer at Onitsha, Mr. Roberts, that 'the appointment of a Paramount Chief for Ajalli District is not working well.' He was referring to the paramount chieftaincy of Chief Igwegbe Odum. Umuchu, where Ezeagu Uchu was chief priest, was in Ajalli District at this time, and Igwegbe Odum was chief from 1914 to 1918.

According to Afigbo, following Lawton's letter and other complaints levelled against Chief Igwegbe by fractious chiefs who contested the legitimacy of his rule over them, Roberts terminated Igwegbe's appointment in 1917. Lawton was succeeded in 1918 (the year of the great German influenza) by District Officer W. H. Lloyd. Igwegbe's downfall came after he contested his removal by accusing the Court Clerk, Mr. Kerri, of accepting 100 pounds (sterling) from him to help him placate

other rebellious chiefs who initially opposed his appointment. When Kerri successfully denied Omenuko's charge, the Inspector of Police, Mr. Dodson, made such an unfavourable report about Igwegbe Odum, alias *OmenukoAku* ('he who displays largesse in times of great scarcity'), that Lawton, before handing over to Lloyd, terminated Igwegbe's warrant as the local chief of Oneh. Chief Igwegbe was publicly reprimanded in front of other chiefs in 1918, and he retired discredited.

According to Afigbo, whose study we are still following, it was under this new District Officer, W.H. Lloyd, who succeeded Lawton in 1918, that Igwegbe Odum agreed to leave Oneh for good and go back to Arondizuogu, the village where he was born and from where he was chased out as a criminal after he sold his carriers into slavery to recover money for goods that perished in a raging river that those carriers were fording. The rise and fall of Igwegbe Odum is the subject matter of the Igbo classic novel *Omenuko*, by Peter Nwana – a book that is still read by Igbo scholars at all levels of the educational ladder.

How does all this concern us? First, Igwegbe Odum comes from Arondizuogu, a town near Umuchu, where Ezeagu Uchu of *Arrow of God* came from. Arondizuogu is no more than one kilometer from Umuchu, to the south (although it was a part of the old Owerri Province, which belonged to a different administrative arrangement entirely). Then, Oneh, where Chief Igwegbe made his headquarters and ruled until his forced retirement in 1918, is about three kilometers east of Umuchu. My wife's mother hails from Oneh. I, myself, know Omenuko's compound, and the hill overlooking that compound is called, even now, *Ugwu Igwegbe*, or Igwegbe's hill. The ruins of Igwegbe's compound, called to this day by natives of Oneh, *Okpulolgwegbe*, or 'the ruins of Igwegbe's compound,' are still in existence.

Now, how does all this enlighten us further? There seems to be a missing link in Afigbo's study, an event that did not concern his article on Chief Igwegbe or was not recorded in his source, possibly because European intelligence reporters did not think it worthwhile to leave on record. The question that concerns us here is what happened immediately before Chief Igwegbe (who was a stranger to Ajalli by all accounts) was offered the paramount chieftaincy either later in 1913 or early in 1914. The missing link, the untold story, could be inferred thus: after Lawton reluctantly released the proud Ezeagu Uchu from detention in 1913 – a man whom he obviously found a dignified personage fit to be elevated to the high post of first paramount chief of Ajalli (Nnolim in his *History of Umuchu* writes on p. 58, new edition: 'I went with my father to Ezeagu Uchu when he performed purification ceremony in his return from Awka') – he must have reluctantly turned to the flamboyant Chief Igwegbe who claimed to be speaking for all the people of Ajalli. When authenticated, all this will be history, not fiction. To fill this lacuna by discovering any intelligence records that actually show Ezeagu Uchu's appointment and his refusal to accept it is a challenge facing historians and literary scholars.

Reactions which followed the publication of 'A Source for *Arrow of God*' were many. In a letter dated November 20, 1980, Professor Ernest Emenyonu invited me to come to the University of Calabar and react to Achebe's lecture and comments about 'A Source for *Arrow of God*' at University of Calabar. The letter reads as follows:

A doctoral candidate in our post graduate programme is preparing a seminar presentation on your article 'A Source for *Arrow of God*'. In view of the fact that this article has generated a lot of controversy among critics of African literature all over the world, we consider it necessary to invite you to be present during this seminar presentation. We wonder also whether you could hold a session with the staff and students of the

Department of English and Literary Studies to clarify and illuminate some of the views that you raised in the said article. I think it is only fair to mention to you, though, that Professor Chinua Achebe had visited here last session and had given a lecture in which he had 'much' to say about your article.

At my interaction with staff and students occasioned by the above letter, our conclusion was that since Achebe is a writer and he was alive, let him reply in writing. I was content that this matter had been temporarily laid to rest at the local level.

But before Professor Emenyonu invited me to the above forum, he and I had encountered Professor Achebe in 1978. I handed the article to Achebe when he visited the Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri, in April, 1978 when Achebe was on a lecture tour. Professor Emenyonu and I were lecturers at A.I.C.E, Owerri, at that time. In May, 1978, Emenyonu and I together visited the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, with N.C.E. papers for moderation. Achebe was then at the University. When we went to Achebe's office to greet him, the first thing he said to me was: 'You accused me of plagiarism in that article.' My reply was: 'I used no such word, Sir.' When we finally sat down, we were dismayed by the anger on his face. He said he was maligned in the article; that his integrity was impugned, that I even accused him of lying. I asked him which section of the article he took exception to. There and then he said he would reply in writing. I saw that Professor Emenyonu's face had fallen. He did not anticipate that depth of anger.

Professor Emenyonu and I drove to Enugu and stayed at the Presidential Hotel. This is relevant because I wrote Professor Lindfors on the Presidential Hotel letter – head, armed with Professor Achebe's promise to reply in writing. But before our trip to Nsukka, I had received a letter from Lindfors in which C.L. Innes' 'A Source for Arrow of God: A Response' (still in typescript) was enclosed. Lindfors had wanted an immediate response from me. My letter thus read. (May 24, 1978):

I was on the point of writing a rejoinder to Professor Innes' comment on my article on 'A Source for *Arrow of God*' when Achebe visited our campus. I found out he had not read my article and I reached it him which he took to Nsukka with him. A week later I had occasion to go to Nsukka University in company of Dr. Ernest Emenyonu. I wanted Achebe's reaction. He said he would reply to my article and very soon. So, I am shelving my reply to Professor Innes until Achebe writes. If things don't get too contentious, I will reply to both in one note of rebuttal. So let's play it by the ear.

Lindfors' reply, dated June 27, reads:

Thanks for your note of May 24. I look forward to receiving Achebe's response to your article and your response to your critics. I am content to wait a while because our next two or three issues have already gone to press.

As far as events go, you and I and Lindfors were still waiting until Achebe's demise in 2013, over thirty years after the publication of 'A Source for *Arrow of God*'.

C.L. Innes' response to my article in which she uncharitably accused me of 'irresponsibility' and 'Eustace Palmer's review of my article in *World Literature Written in English* (Spring, 1980) brought to the attention of the literary world my article on 'A Source for *Arrow of God*.' Palmer's article contradicted Innes when he asserted that Nnolim's article 'was an honest effort at literary criticism' and that there was no need for Innes' spirited attack. I was indeed bracing for Achebe's rejoinder in the manner Soyinka replied to the rambunctious troika of Chinweizu, Madubuike and Jemie's article: 'Toward the Decolonization of African Literature.' Soyinka had in *Transition*, 48, 1975 printed the attack side by side with his own equally caustic reply captioned 'Neo-Tarzanism'.

While we waited for a response from Achebe, discussion generated by my article never ceased. C.L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors anthologized 'A Source for *Arrow of God*' fully in *Critical*

Perspectives on Chinua Achebe (London: Heinemann, 1979), thus drawing attention to the importance of that study. In 1980, in an interview with Chinua Achebe, Kalu Ogbaa made reference to my article (published in 'An Interview with Chinua Achebe,' *RAL*, 12, 1981), and Achebe referred to me as:

a certain fellow who was claiming that *Arrow of God* was written by his uncle which led to the rather curious situation in which the fellow was dismissed as irresponsible by a white critic. It really should have been expected that some Igbo critics would have shown as much concern as the white critic about matters of critical responsibility in our literature.

In 1980 also, Bu Buakei Jabbi, in 'Myth and Ritual in *Arrow of God*' (*African Literature Today* No. 11, 1980) referring to 'A Source for *Arrow of God*' accused Charles Nnolim of 'an unfortunate ineptness in source attribution coupled with a basic interpretative myopia to seriously mar what is otherwise an impregnable array of evidence for the historical authenticity of Achebe's background materials'. Defenders of Achebe's artistic integrity had formed a formidable club. Orally, an undocumented rumour mill circulated the dangerous gossip that Charles Nnolim's 'A Source for *Arrow of God*' had denied Achebe the Nobel Prize.

In 1981, Robert Wren published his influential book, *Achebe's World* which acknowledged the existence of 'A Source for *Arrow of God*' and S.A. Nnolim's *The History of Umuchu*. On p. 85, Wren writes: 'Charles Nnolim has described this book [S.A. Nnolim's *The History of Umuchu*] at length in a clear but somewhat overstated article, 'A Source for *Arrow of God*' in *Research in African Literatures*, Spring 1977.'

On page 90, Wren writes under a sub-heading entitled: *The History of Umuchu*:

S.A. Nnolim's *History of Umuchu* gave Achebe the vital plot device of the priest who refuses the chieftaincy and alters the religious calendar during imprisonment. It was the *History* too that

provided the town created from six rival villages as a defence against the Abam. Although Achebe's memory about the pamphlet is faulty, he used village names drawn from Nnolim and Umuchu In a letter to me he offered a meaning for the name of the god *Ulu*: 'Antidote.' No other authority not even natives at Ogidi attest this definition, but Nnolim identifies the protective god in his account as *Ichu* or 'antidote.'

It is clear then, that only the interest generated by 'A Source for *Arrow of God*' enabled Wren to search for and read S.A. Nnolim's *The History of Umuchu* in spite of its limited circulation.

The controversy never ceased even when J.O.J. Nwachukwu Agbada in an interview boldly raised the matter again. Nwachukwu Agbada's question was: 'why did you choose to be almost silent to Charles Nnolim's 'A Source for *Arrow of God*'? Do you think the reply by Miss Innes is enough?' Achebe's near admission goes as follows:

Yes, that's more than enough.... The matter is not closed.... The only thing I want to say is that the reliance on oral history is something which we have to do. I believe that we have to rely a lot on oral history.... The whole thing is not a secret. I had already told people about this event which happened in this village. I had heard about it on radio and had given a fairly full account of this. There was a programme which had been done by one of our best producers in those days called Chijioke Abagwe, in which someone was being interviewed who turned out to be Nnolim's uncle about his village and the story of this chief who was imprisoned by the D.O. came out in the interview. This was in the fifties. I was so fascinated by this story that I got Abagwe to locate this man again and again we went to his place and he told me a lot more about the incident. Not only that, we even went to his village in order to have a feel of this place. That's the indebtedness to Nnolim's uncle. I have used such things before and I will use them again. (*Commonwealth*: 13.1, Autumn, 1990, 121-122).

In conclusion, we can assert that what has occupied us in the last thirty minutes or so, are matters arising from 'A Source for *Arrow of God*' published in 1977, and they are substantive. Robert Wren's work and Professor J.O.J. Nwachukwu Agbada's interview have given us enough facts to draw our own conclusions on whether or not Chinua Achebe was acquainted with *The History of Umuchu* whose author S.A. Nnolim he admitted he knew, whose village he said he visited and whose book he may have read, even when in the face of all these facts, he denies knowledge of the existence of *The History of Umuchu*. What we have discussed in this study are matters that arose after the publication of 'A Source for *Arrow of God*' in 1977.

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