

Mythic Thought and Mythic Ideation in *Arrow of God*

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Abstract

Achebe is a prolific writer whose works in prose and verse have received global acclaim. As a pioneer in the African literary scene, his contributions to colonial and post-colonial African literature have been profound. Many critics have studied his works based on culture conflict but this paper takes a different turn. It is an attempt to explore mythic thought and ideation in *Arrow of God*. The title *Arrow of God* is an Igbo proverb which in itself is mythic. This paper, therefore, will bring illumination and insight to the text which in turn will contribute immensely to scholarship.

Keywords: Mythic thought, mythic ideation, symbol, narrative, significance, archetype.

Introduction

All literatures have a cultural base and every text is meaningful and purposeful within a recognizable tradition. The writer expresses his thoughts and ideas through language. Cultural nuances and ideologies which give the text its authenticity find expression in the narrative. Dieke points out that Jung's theory of

the collective unconscious asserts the existence of a racial memory out of which crystallize arcane myths and recurrent patterns such as the age-long archetypes or primordial images. The artist thus creates from this reservoir, and what manifests in his art is a distinct individual consciousness, which for Jung is not without predetermining powers within the psyche. These predetermining factors Jung finds in the idea of the 'collective unconscious' (1993:2-3). It is in the light of this that Akwanya sees literature as 'reflecting in many ways the movement of mythic thoughts' which he defines as 'part of the mental framework with which we register and make sense of the world' (1997: 127).

The narrative which is the basic form of literature is as old as thought and carries echoes of the cultural practices associated with the place where the action takes place. Hence Akwanya observes that 'Nigerian literary works, in the early stages especially, are recognized as the cultural product of particular ethnic groups in Nigeria. This cultural composite is associated with a worldview incorporating mythic narratives as well as other elements of mythic ideation which insinuate themselves as unmediated truth' (Akwanya, 2005:208). Thus, 'narrative in its earliest forms is seen in commandments, proverbs, riddles and aetiological folk tales as modes of communicating myth', according to Northrop Frye. This makes myth, according to Akwanya, 'an inexhaustible source of insight for the interpretation of experience and generating new works in literature' (1997:129). In the same vein, he believes that 'the nature of literature can hardly be grasped without first mastering the movements of mythic thought' (1997:104). Some technical terms used by different critics to refer to one and the same idea are used interchangeably in this study. They are 'significance' from Northrop Frye 'primary symbols' from Paul Ricoeur,



‘archetype’ from Jung, and ‘symbol’ or ‘mythic ideation’ from Ernst Cassirer’. This notion of collapse in meaning of concepts is what is explained by Frye as cited in Akwanya (1997:116):

The Myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle. Hence the myth is the archetype, though it might be convenient to say myth only when referring to narrative, and archetype when referring to significance (Archetypes 429).

It can be gleaned from the above, therefore, that an understanding of the role of mythic thought and ideation in determining the actions of characters in a text will enhance an understanding of the entire construct – *Arrow of God*.

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African literature is laden with myths and Achebe’s art seems to live and move in the mythic environment as its natural element. The title *Arrow of God* is an Igbo proverb which in itself is mythic and derives from a people’s primal myths. By its nature, myth is always the product and property of a particular people and can hardly be said to belong to an individual. ‘Myths are specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience’ (Weiner, 1973). Achebe’s *Arrow of God* gives accounts of pantheons of gods in Umuaro and the mythic thought associated with their existence. We find such gods as Idemili, Ogwugwu, Agwu, Ngene, Eru, and Alusi. Like all myths, ‘Idemili was there at the beginning of things. Nobody made it’. Idemili’s immortality is represented in words and symbols. We learn about the myth of Idemili from an aetiological folk tale told by the chief priest himself to his friend Ogbuefi Nwaka:

Idemili means Pillar of Water. As the pillar of this house holds the roof so does Idemili hold up the raincloud in the sky so that it does not fall down. Idemili belongs to the sky and that is why I, his priest, cannot sit on bare earth (41).

The severance of the head of the priest of Idemili from his body at death re-enacts this myth. Instead of burying it in the earth, it is hung up in the shrine of Idemili as a symbol of its place in the heavenly realm. No wonder Obiechina regards myths as 'stories of a sacred nature that treat ultimate mysteries like death, the afterlife, creation and the gods' (1990: 10). Significantly too Ezidemili, the priest cannot sit on the bare floor because Idemili belongs to the sky. This is in contrast to the deity Ulu which was created out of the need of the people at a particular point of their history. We learn that the rampage of Abam slave raiders necessitated the creation of Ulu as a new god of spiritual and material security. It is placed over and above other gods, thus playing a central and unifying role for the people. Ezeulu's function as the priest is significant in determining the economic and spiritual wellbeing of the people.

The deity Eru is the god that gives wealth to those who find favour with him. He is only mentioned once in an encounter with Obika. The Alusi is the deity that owns one of the streams where the people go to fetch water which must be placated as the oracle demands whenever there is need to avert any impending calamity. Ngene like Alusi owns one of the streams in Umuaro. Agwu on the other hand is a god whose mother gives birth to madness. We are told that Ezeulu's mother had Agwu. The mythic thought in the existence of all these deities is signified in the different functions they perform, but as said earlier the protective function of Ulu brings all other gods under its fold.

Roland Barthes observes that ‘myth is a form of communication and that it is through an analysis of its language that we can grasp its essential cultural functions’ (1977: 60). Akwanya illustrates the communicative function of myth in his analysis of the myth of Idemili taken from two different works of Achebe.

In *Arrow of God* Idemili means Pillar of Water and its function is to hold up the rainclouds. It is this function that bears the stress of the name: its reality need not be physical at all. In *Anthills* Idemili memorializes a momentous event, which is purely irruptive in character, namely the bole that once upon a time rose from a lake, bridging earth and heaven. But having been employed by Daughter of the Almighty as a means of transport, a certain fusion occurs, resulting in the name of the vehicle being transferred to the rider instead of the other way around, as a logical mind might expect (Akwanya, 1997: 108-9).

Akwanya illustrates further as he cites Cassirer who points out that human language embodies both a mythic aspect and a logical aspect. He also observes that ‘it is the mythic nature of thought that enables proverbial words to exercise power that is glaring and concrete at the point of realization’. This is aptly illustrated when Ezeulu, though proud of Obika’s bravery, nevertheless, cautions him with the proverbial words:

It is praiseworthy to be brave and fearless, my son, but sometimes it is better to be a coward. We often stand in the compound of a coward to point at the ruin where a brave man used to live. The man who has never submitted to anything will soon submit to the burial mat (11).

These words later come to full realization in the life of Obika which is cut short by untimely death.

Similar to the mythic power of proverbs is the communicative force of mythic ideation conveyed through Ezeulu's dream while in detention at Okperi. About Ezeulu's dream we read:

That night Ezeulu saw in a dream a big assembly of Umuaro elders ... but instead of himself, it was his grandfather who rose to speak to them. They refused to listen ... 'why should we rely on him to tell us the season of the year?' asked Nwaka. 'Is there anyone who cannot see the moon in his own compound? And what is the power of Ulu today? He saved our fathers from the warrior of Abam but he cannot save us from the white man ... Then the people seized the chief priest who had changed from Ezeulu's grandfather to himself and began to push him from one group to another. Some spat on his face and called him the priest of a dead god (159).

The unfolding events on his return to Umuaro shows the prophetic nature of the dream and the possibility that Ezeulu neither understands the dream nor reckons with it. It is in this regard that Ezugu citing Frye rightly points out that, 'in most cases, dreams are cryptic illusions to the dreamers own life not fully understood by him. In all dreams, however, there is a mythic element which has a power of independent communication' (Frye, 1971: 107). By his refusal to reckon properly and announce the date for the feast of the new yam, Ezeulu allows ego and anger to becloud his good judgment, for the first time, on an issue thus playing into the hands of many: first his enemies who believe that he has caught the madness of his mother; second, his assistants and well-wishers who have been urging him to make the announcement; and lastly, the Christian church which seizes the opportunity to reap where they did not sow.

Furthermore, the appearance of a new moon in Umuaro embodies mythic thought. While the moon may just be a natural

occurrence in some cultures, in Umuaro it is symbolic as it is a sign from the gods. The cosmic sign of the new moon is culturally significant and duty demands that Ezeulu must not lose sight of its appearance in order to avert a cultural calamity. That is why he painstakingly observes the sky for the appearance of the moon. The meaning of the gods is invested in the moon. The moon could be a symbol of good fortune or a symbol of bad fortune. We learn from Matefi, Ezeulu's wife, that the moon in which Okuata died was a bad moon. Even the shape of the moon is symbolic. Mythic ideation in the appearance of a new moon shows that each moon heralds an important season that is of spiritual and economic significance in the life of the people and provides security and purposefulness of existence to them. This is illustrated in Malinowski's assertion that 'myth is not only a system of beliefs, but also a font of ethnographic information; in as much as it expresses, enhances and codifies beliefs, safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of men' (in Akwanya 1997:101).

More so, festivals in Umuaro have mythic ideation. The Festival of the First Pumpkin Leaves is a festival of cleansing before a new planting season, and it is in this festival that Ezeulu re-enacts the first coming together of the six villages as one in Umuaro. Like the biblical Jesus Christ, the priest of Ulu carries away the sins of Umuaro on this occasion by performing the rituals associated with this cleansing. We read that Ugoye murmured the following prayers as the chief priest approached where she stood:

Great Ulu who kills and saves, I implore you to cleans my household of all defilement. If I have spoken it with my mouth or seen it with my eyes, or if I have heard it with my ears or

stepped on it with my foot or if it has come through my children or my friends or kinsfolk let it follow these leave (72). Ezeulu's responsibilities as seen in these festivals are symbolic in that he 'goes ahead and confronts danger before it reaches his people'. The feast of the new yam is also symbolic in that it marks the end of the old year and the beginning of a new year. Before this feast no one harvests the big farms neither would any man of title taste any yam from whatever source. The ritual surrounding this festival includes the offering of a good-sized seed-yam to Ulu's shrine by every able-bodied man. This is also symbolic in that it is used to reckon the number of able bodied men in Umuaro. The number in turn would signify an increase or decrease in population which calls for a sacrifice of gratitude or that of appeasement to Ulu.

Furthermore, objects such as Ofo, Ikenga and Okposi are mythic materials in *Arrow of God* as they are spiritually and culturally symbolic. A man's social standing is signified by his household shrine. 'Such symbols not only encapsulate a man's soul, they also signify his identification with the spiritual' (Gikandi 1987: 152). The conflict between Ebo and Akuakalia gives us a glimpse of this. Akuakalia's destruction of Ebo's Ikenga is seen as a violation of Ebo's soul, a destruction of his manhood and a destruction of his relationship with his ancestors. These mythic materials are symbolic in that they not only enhance the spiritual stability of the people but also breathe life into the physical. We read that Nwoye's convulsions cease at the time he begins to commune with his Okposi which was placed among the others in the family shrine.

Conclusion

From the above discourse, we glimpse the significance of myth in shaping human action, and as Frye rightly observes, myth is the matrix of literature, because major literary works keep returning to it. One of the main uses of myth in literary criticism is to 'enable us as critics to understand the corresponding place that a work of literature has in the context of literature as a whole' (Ezugu 1990). Criticism is the tool with which the mythic mind decodes what has been skilfully encoded, thus, forcing a text to yield its full meaning to the reader and thereby enlightening and stimulating the reader's mythic and cultural awareness through apt interpretation and judgment.

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