

Traditional Political Structures of the Igbo Society in *Arrow of God* and Implications for Contemporary Nigerian Democracy

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Abstract

Umuaro of *Arrow of God* represents in totality the typical traditional Igbo society especially of the early 20th century. Though the novel is mostly read or viewed as a counter-narrative to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, *Arrow of God* is a presentation in definitive detail of the complex political structures of the Igbo people before the intervention of the colonial administration. This paper critically analyses the presentation of the political structure of the Igbo society beginning from the household structure to the wider society—the roles and responsibilities attached to political and religious positions and leadership as well as the areas of conflict and rivalry. In addition, this paper discusses the traditional process of building and maintaining inter-personal, inter-family and inter-community relationships which ultimately constitute the rudiments for the political super structure of Igbo society. Ezeulu, his immediate household and extended family, his political and religious offices and the dynamics of their operations in Umuaro have been used as a veritable instrument for this exploration. The representation made by Achebe in this literary work also has a lot of implications for Nigeria's contemporary political dispensation in terms of the values of relationships, power devolution, sources of conflict and rivalry, and the dangers of extremism and impunity.

Introduction

Arrow of God is one of Achebe's artistic instruments for showcasing the sophisticated pre-colonial cultural and political systems of the African world with special reference to the Igbo society. Like most of the post-colonial Anglophone West African novels, the main focus of *Arrow of God* is the resultant conflict between the invading western culture and the embattled indigenous one. Basically, Achebe writes because he wants to show:

that African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depths and value and beauty; that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity that many African peoples all but lost during the colonial period, and it is this that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost (cited in Bernth Lindfors 25).

It is obvious that the cultural and political structures of the pre-colonial period which Achebe has showcased in *Arrow of God* about fifty years ago are no longer tenable. There is need for a re-reading of the text in the context of contemporary realities. Moreover, Achebe's confession of his being 'conscripted by the story' (*There was a Country* 35) or perhaps possessed by the spirit (of art or prophesy) may be inadvertently suggesting the dual or multiple personalities in him. As such, the reading of his narratives may not yield the full levels of meaning without consciousness of their deeper philosophical, visionary and prophetic dimensions.

Arrow of God presents a fascinating maze of traditional structures of relationships and different modes of interactions that make up the social, political and democratic institutions of the fictional pre-colonial Umuaro. This superstructure carries among

other things, the politico-economic, democratic and hierarchical social order of the society. The structure begins from the family household unit to the village, and then the town and inter-town levels. This paper intends to critically survey and identify the traditional democratic and political structures projected in this novel with a view to assessing their place and relevance in contemporary Nigerian democratic dispensation.

Pre-colonial Socio-Organizational Structure

Umuro in *Arrow of God* is presented as a typical African political entity with multiple and various social strata, units and sub-units which eventually build up into the larger community, beginning with the family unit as the base. The family can be seen as the most basic political unit in a typical African setting, especially among the Igbo. As observed by Opatá, 'family life is very central in Igbo life and thought' (31). The family of Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, as depicted in the text, presents the political structure of a typical traditional Igbo family. The head of the family, as the chief administrative, executive and security officer of the family unit, positions his hut (*obi*) at the forefront of his fenced compound. The huts of his three wives are located behind. Each of the three wives and their children operate at the level of sub-units whose allegiance and total submission to the headship and leadership of the family head remain unquestionable. That is the reason Ezeulu is seen to superintend over, and give definite instructions on matters as minute as the baby-sitting of his grandchildren (123-125). The male offspring of the family are seen to develop and mature into smaller family units, but still attached to the parent-body. That is why Edego at maturity builds his own small hut before bringing in his wife. Similarly, Obika does the same, but a bigger and more permanent one. This is because Edego who would inherit Ezeulu's does not need a permanent one.

The above family structure carries with it an in-built system of persistent struggle for the family's political and economic stability. For instance, Ezeulu's involvement in the remotest detail of the administration of his family and the finality of his decision in every matter in the family is seen as an instrument for family political stability. It is also observable that the weight of the responsibilities and side effects of Ezeulu's politico-religious position as chief priest are not borne by him alone but by his wives and children, extending to his village and the entire Umuaro. He would expect his sons to be active defenders of that political position being challenged by not only the priest of Idemili but the new religion. He admonishes Edogo for not fighting a man who speaks against the family over Oduche's boxing-up of the python (53); and Oduche for not informing him of developments in the church which affect his position adversely (220). Matefi, Ezeulu's second but senior wife, in her encounter with fellow market women over the adverse economic situation created by Ezeulu, would not allow herself to be 'tied into lappa and carried away' (211). Her defence of her husband's political position is total.

Political stability is fostered by economic power and social recognition. To strengthen the political status and relevance of the family, Ezeulu's family members engage in worthwhile occupational and pastime ventures. Edogo, Ezeulu's first son, takes to carving. Through this, and apart from the monetary remuneration, he is able to boost the image of the family and generate goodwill and gifts which count as added recognition and dignity to Ezeulu's family. On one occasion, a gift of a calabash of palm wine from the man for whom Edogo carves the *ozo* title door serves as social lubricant to the guests in Ezeulu's *obi* (96). The socio-political weight of such gifts outweighs their monetary value. Such a gift embodies appreciation, recognition, honour and respect. On the part of Obika, the second son, his youthful vigour and masculine skills in masquerading fetch him and the Ezeulu family social recognition

too. For the sake of Ezeulu's political image, Obika defies his symptoms of ill health and chooses to perform the Ogbazulobodo night mask for the second burial of Ogbuefi Amalu (224). Both Edogo and Obika differently demonstrate their skills in the new Mask of the Otakagu age group (194-201). Ezeulu's family can be seen to have acquired or to be acquiring the status and qualities of a stable political structure as observed by Akuebue, Ezeulu's most intimate friend. He tells Ezeulu that:

Apart from your high position as Chief Priest, you are also blessed with a great compound. But in all great compounds there must be people of all kinds—some good, some bad, some fearless and some cowardly; those who bring in wealth and those who scatter it, those who give good advice and those who speak the words of palm wine. That is why we say that whatever tune you play in the compound of a great man there is always someone to dance to it (100).

Ezeulu's family is thus presented as the microcosm of the larger Umuaro. The sense of accommodation and tolerance for diversity of characters and personalities which is required for the full development of humanity is emphasized here. It is suggested here that the larger a family, village or town becomes, the more it should be ready to accommodate diversity.

Arrow of God portrays the established traditional praxis of inter-family and inter-community connections and diplomacy. It shows a network of relationships that string together families and communities through friendship and marriage, and groups of men and women through age grades as well as social and political tasks and statuses. At the level of inter-family relationship, the intimate friendship between Ezeulu and Akuebue which runs down the various levels of both families is also a reflection of such relationship between the villages and neighbouring towns of Umuaro. Ezeulu's exchange of visits with Akuebue (96-100, 110-111) illustrate the strong bond of mutual respect and love shared

among all the strata of both families—wives, sons and daughters. Also the fact that John Nwodika's wife, Nwego, is the daughter of Ezeulu's old friend from Umuagu facilitates the measure of trust Ezeulu reposes on John Nwodika during his detention at Okperi. Apart from friendship, marriage is another important channel for establishing connections between families, villages and communities. This is depicted in the successful diplomatic missions between Ibe's family of Umuogwugwu and Ezeulu's of Umuachala in handling the settlement of the marriage misunderstanding between Akueke and her husband, despite the rash approach of Obika. On the other hand, the disastrous mission from Umuaro to Okperi led by Akukalia is evidence of repercussions for disregard of established traditional diplomatic practices. Akukalia defiles the filial blood-bond between him and his maternal people of Okperi by choosing the path of aggression instead of peace in carrying the message of his paternal kinsmen to Okperi. The reason for choosing him for that task is his blood tie with the people of Okperi. The cynical comment by Otikpo, Akukalia's maternal kinsman, buttresses Akukalia's display of obvious disrespect for his maternal kinsmen. He says 'Akukalia has a message for Okperi which forbids him to eat kolanut or shake hands' (23).

On enmity, it can be seen that between Ezeulu and Nwaka there is a deep one, which does not end with their two families but extends to their villages—Umunneora and Umuachala. Both villages dread each other. Even during Ezeulu's detention at Okperi, he finds it difficult initially to accept hospitality from a fellow Umuaro man just because he comes from Umunneora. Akuebue confirms this by telling his friend, Ezeulu, 'When they told me that a man of Umunneora was looking after you I told them it was a lie. How could it be, seeing the war we wage at home' (168). Akuebue instantly conducts a blood-covenant ritual between Edo and John Nwodika in order to establish a new private friendly relationship between the two families of Ezeulu and John Nwodika. The ritual symbolises

that the two families have become tied by bond of oath never to harm each other.

There is a clear demonstration of democratic principles and process at all the levels of the social structures depicted in *Arrow of God*. The consent and opinions of all concerned members of every social group are sought before arriving at a decision for an action. In Ezeulu's family we find his male children led by Edogo come together to ask Ezeulu for the work they would do for him (13). Also during the re-negotiation of Akueke's return to her husband, Ezeulu's sons and only brother are given the opportunity to contribute to the process of decision-making (64). At group levels, for instance, the Otakagu age-group meeting (84-86), the Umuaro town meetings (14-18,26-28), the titled men-leaders of Umuaro (206-209), the process of reaching decisions and actions always reflect some traditional democratic principles.

Relevance of the Traditional Political Culture

African art serves specific purposes in African society. This is the reason Achebe writes his novels specifically to educate his people on what they are worth. A critical reading of *Arrow of God* will reveal that Achebe's depiction of a fictional Umuaro, devastated by political wrangling may turn out to be a realist's reflection, if not the actual representation of Nigeria's political experiences. Some of the underlying factors presented in the text have a lot of implications for Nigeria's past and present political experience. Some of them will be highlighted and discussed.

Arrow of God seems to highlight some negative traits which appear to be contiguous with politics, irrespective of social level. Among them are rivalry, jealousy, envy and sectionalism. These traits as depicted in the novel are seen to manifest themselves even at the most basic level of the political structure, the family. In looking at Ezeulu's family, for instance, one can find subtle traces of envy and rivalry among the members of the sub-units of the

family. Matefi's daughter Ojiugo, out of jealousy, would not tolerate his half-brother Nwafo's sharing and relishing the meals her mother serves Ezeulu (9-10). Matefi and Ugoye are Ezeulu's second and third wives respectively. They exhibit the typical characteristic jealousy and envy for which co-wives are traditionally known. They grumble about whatever they consider as preferential treatment given by their husband to any other. That is why Matefi accuses her mate of saving her money for jewellery instead of spending it in feeding her children (10). Even among the sons of Ezeulu, there are traces of jealousy. Edogo's envy towards Nwafo are evidenced in Edogo's complaint to Akuebue about Ezeulu's apparent preferential treatment of Nwafo, and his eventual ordering the boy out of his father's *obi* during Ezeulu's absence.

At the level of the six villages of Umuaro, the jealousy and rivalry is between Ezidemili the chief priest of Idemili and Ezeulu the Chief Priest of Ulu. Idemili belongs to Umunneora, one of the six villages of Umuaro while Ulu belongs to all the six villages. That suggests the obvious supremacy of Ulu over other village deities. The source of the rivalry may be traced to the debate on the issue of total or partial acceptability of the authority of Ezeulu over Ezidemili and the rest of Umuaro (27, 41). Nwaka is fronted by Ezidemili to challenge Ezeulu. He employs his power of oratory and the influence of his wealth to draw followership. Because Ezeulu cannot match him in these two weapons of battle, Nwaka has always carried the day but the people of Umuaro have always paid dearly for that. This is what tears Umuaro into two sections, one on the side of Ezeulu and the other Nwaka/Ezidemili. These negative traits are prevalent in all the strata of our nation's political experience.

The pre-colonial political structure presented in *Arrow of God* can be seen as the reflection of the colonial and post-colonial political experiences of Nigeria in many ways—the structuring of the polity, the inherent operational defects, the devastation of the vulnerable masses and the danger of extremities in political

activities. The pre-colonial political structure of Umuaro where the six villages that make up Umuaro resolve to come together under one umbrella may be likened to the bonding together of Nigeria's ethnic nationalities for the political convenience of the colonial masters. The splitting of the country into states, and presently the loose-tying up of states into six geo-political zones reflects the Umuaro political structuring experience. The ancestors of Umuaro foresaw potential danger in the alliance and felt that the position and power of the Ezeulu would not be abused if it is made to reside with the youngest and weakest member of the alliance. That was not sufficient to shield the office of Ezeulu from rivalry, envy and jealousy which eventually turn out to be the political worms that devastate both Umuaro and Ulu. In the Nigerian context, the problem of amalgamation remains to date the main structural defect that stalls the socio-political advancement of the Nigerian nation. The problem is summarised by Achebe in *There was a Country* (2). He says 'if the Berlin Conference sealed her [Nigeria's] fate, then the amalgamation of the protectorates inextricably complicated Nigeria's destiny'. The forebears of Umuaro, however, have shown a bit of foresightedness by providing what they have felt would give Umuaro and the office of the Ezeulu some measure of stability; but in the case of Nigeria, a lot of unanswerable questions follow the amalgamation story. Nigeria thus becomes a political entity created by Britain to serve her economic needs and to suit her administrative convenience. This structural defect obviously results in operational defect.

The political scene of Umuaro presents the key players as Nwaka and Ezeulu. The text focuses on their tussle for power and supremacy within what they view as their territories of jurisdiction. Rather than enhance the purpose for which their forefathers brought themselves together, they now bring destruction on the land. In the context of Nigeria's political experience, the flamboyant and exuberant Nwakas and headstrong Ezeulus have continued to

dominate the political scene, and make the masses the cannon fodder in unnecessary wars, and victims of destructive economic policies. From the Nigeria/Biafra war to the present insurgency in the north east of Nigeria, the causes are obviously traceable to political power tussles.

The situation of unhealthy rivalry among the political leaders results in extremism and abuse of power with impunity. Ezeulu uses the tool dedicated for his service to his people as a viable weapon of war against the people he is ordained to protect. He 'leads the god to ruin himself' (*Arrow of God* 213). Many Nigerian politicians are today accused of using their political positions for personal gain, against the law of the land. Ezeulu's physical, social and spiritual separation from his own people of Umuaro (*Arrow of God* 219) marks symbolically his rejection by the people and the god. In the contemporary Nigerian political setting too, most politicians have wittingly or otherwise separated themselves from their people who have given them the mandate.

The unfortunate abuse of the rights of the common people is always the case in every situation of political turmoil. In *Arrow of God*, it is the common man who is subjected to economic hardship resulting from Ezeulu's refusal to eat up the remaining sacred yams and consequent non-harvesting of the yams in the farm. It is revealed that the repercussions of most political wrangling have very far-reaching devastating effects on the masses. The biting effect of the prolonged season declared by Ezeulu affects Ogbuefi Amalu's family seriously in the second burial of their father. So does it affect uncountable families who suffer helplessly. The insurgency in the north east claims the lives of many innocent Nigerians and not those of the politicians who initiated it. The hardships associated with their dislocation from their homes are unimaginable. These are some of the manifestations of the common man's predicament resulting from political disagreements of the ruling class.

A very important issue raised in *Arrow of God* which touches most directly on the Nigerian political operation is the problem of selection of leaders. Ezeulu as the Chief Priest of Ulu is not a democratic product of course. The sanctity and volume of his office, however, appear to have overwhelmed him. In a proper democracy, the likes of Ezeulu should not be given such a sensitive position because it is noted that there are traces of mental infirmity in Ezeulu's mother, which ailment he could have inherited. A person who does not possess quality mental health and power cannot be given charge of the affairs of a community. Achebe actually makes a case for proper selection of political leaders as a prelude to quality leadership (*There was a Country* 244).

Conclusion

Arrow of God is Achebe's work of fiction which, apart from telling the story of a people whose complex and sophisticated systems of life have been thwarted by western 'civilization', subtly reveals the basics as well as the general features and nature of politics in both the pre-colonial era and the present African society. This paper has attempted to throw some light on the obscure or neglected traditional institutions on which the political structures are built—relationships and social ties, positions and responsibilities. It can be observed that the coming and instruments of the new religion as depicted in *Arrow of God* facilitated the collapse of African traditional endogenous institutions without offering a better replacement. It is the view expressed in this paper that this situation may be seen as responsible for the failure of the nation's political system and culture. The social, economic and political stability of any nation begins with the family structure. This situation calls attention to the need therefore to start building a new political structure for the nation beginning from the family as exemplified by the Ezeulu's family structure.

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