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Achebe's *Arrow of God* and the Greek Sense of the Tragic

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Abstract
Some of the ideas most commonly applied in appreciating Achebe's *Arrow of God* are a theme of culture conflict, expressive language, and vivid character delineation. Also frequently acknowledged are the novels' graphic representation of events and its masterful incorporation of traditional Igbo cultural idioms. But a re-reading of the text, especially in the context of the current historical and literary climate of Nigeria, reveals some of its salient aesthetic values that have not received thorough attention. Prominent among these qualities is the novels' Greek tragic propensity. This classical bent is deeply explored here to establish its profile in the text, reveal its transcultural relevance, and determine its significance in a transposition of the novel to a 'folkist' dramatic form. The transcultural exposure will further be vindicated as critically alternate to the cliché of culture conflict.

Introduction
As a literary concept, tragedy is traced to the classical Greeks, but later became identified, in varying perspectives among other world cultures. During its divergence, tragedy acquired diverse interpretations in response to 'the many attempts to stretch Aristotle's analysis (of the genre) to apply to later tragic forms' (Abrams 371). In these attempts, the Greek–Aristotelian sense of tragedy was either rigidified, misinterpreted, modified or

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challenged in line with new conceptualizations that conform to the critical climate and praxis of each age. Among the diverse senses of the tragic or tragedy are the Greek, the Roman, the Medieval, the Renaissance, and the Neoclassical concepts. The bourgeois, the sentimental, and the Modern tragic senses are also noteworthy. Owing to want of space, the only concept that will be enunciated here is the Greek model, since it is directly related to the objective of this work. Aristotle's theories of tragedy in his *Poetics* encapsulate the Greek sense of the tragic, and provide insight into the Greek tragic propensity of the novel *Arrow of God*. Sam Ukala's theories of 'folkism', as well as critical enunciations on transculturalism converge with Aristotle's ideas to constitute this paper's theoretical framework.

The Greek Tragic Propensity of *Arrow of God*

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines tragedy as

> An imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornaments, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative, through pity and fear, affecting the proper purgation of these emotions (31).

Tragedy (here also called 'the tragic') is considered a 'dramatic mode' (Heath xix); 'an imitation of an action that is serious … in the manner of dramatic, rather than of narrative presentation' (Abrams 371). These interpretations tend to confine tragedy to its dramatic frontiers, thereby interrogating its place in prose narrative – *Arrow of God* inclusive. But the answer is not farfetched.

According to Nwahunanya, drama – tragedy inclusive – found its way into the novel around the 18th century, when prose writing began to tell realistic stories of serious issues, identifiable human characters in society, and well known settings. 'Prose writings thus began to perform the same function in promoting the illusion of

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reality that had been attributed to drama earlier by the physical presence of the actor, his gestures and inflections, and the costumes and stage settings' (28). Thus, *Arrow of God* embodies tragic qualities which perform dramatic functions and can be explored for their correlation with the classical Greek tragedy.

The authoritative critique of classical Greek tragedy by Aristotle provides a reliable direction for assessing the Greek sense of the tragic and verifying its relationship with the novel under study. Aristotle recognized five broad aspects in any tragic work, although he did not necessarily describe them in the following terms:

> the composition of the tragic universe; the content of the tragic tale; the physical form of tragedy (plot and structure); the status of the tragic hero, and the language (poetics of tragedy) (Nwahunanya 3).

The composition of the tragic universe here refers to the world and its inhabitants, as portrayed in a given tragic work. Many classical plays, especially the ones written by Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, portray the tragic universe composed of men and gods. The gods operate from a supernatural realm, supervise the affairs of the living and determine their destiny. Any attempt by man to circumvent this fate meets with ill-fortune.

Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* depicts this universe. There is co-existence of the natural and the preternatural. The latter – the Theban gods – influence the former, determining their fate and visiting wrath for any attempt to circumvent its design for the humans. For instance, at birth, Oedipus' parents consult the oracle which predicts danger in connection with him, and rules that his life be terminated to forestall the calamity. The subsequent events which involve setting aside the divine warning lead to tragic consequences.

Arrow of God is set within the same kind of tragic universe as the above. Umuaro community in the novel is composed of human beings like Ezeulu, his wives, and children, his friend Akuebue, his

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arch enemies Ogbuefi Nwaka and Ezeidemili; and others, comprising the natives and some Christian converts. The ecological system as part of the universe significantly features the sacred python. Evidently, human beings here share the same cosmic setting, though in different realms, with deities like *Ulu*, *Ogwugwu*, *Idemili* and others.

Ulu is the most central and unifying deity among the component communities of Umuaro. Ezeulu – the priest of Ulu – operates as a priest-king. Like the case of Oedipus, Ezeulu's tragedy occurs as a consequence of his setting aside Ulu's warning that he should drop his punitive refusal to perform necessary ritual in order to announce the year's harvest.

These examples of Oedipus and Ezeulu bring to the fore, the issue about the status of the tragic hero. In the Greek sense, this hero must be a highly placed personage, reaching the heights of kings, princes, demi-gods; or possessing certain powers that set him above other humans. The tragic hero is the protagonist of a dramatic action who is 'distinguished by admirable personal qualities', by the idea that 'he had access to sources of energy and insight denied the common men, and by their status as representatives of the social community' (Kennedy 271).

According to Kenneth Pickering, the tragic hero of the Greek mould is:

> originally mythological: a demi-god who had qualities and performed deeds that set him apart from normal mortals. To some extent, this concept extended to drama, but in plays the hero was a character of greater stature than other characters, though also fallible. The hero of a play was the character whose action and fate evoked the pity and fear that Aristotle considered essential to the experience of witnessing tragedy and by that process the audience sensed catharsis. The classical hero was not only of noble or princely status but also imbued

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> with noble potential, which made his ultimate fall all the more poignant (36).

Aristotle further delineates the status of tragic heroes while enunciating the qualities of a well-constructed plot. He states that a perfect tragedy should be arranged on a complex plan, rather than simple, and must arouse pity and fear. The changes of fortune must not be the fate of a virtuous man falling from prosperity to adversity; nor that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity. Nor, again, should the fall of a complete villain be exhibited. All this cannot arouse pity and fear, since pity is caused by undeserved misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man similar to us. He continues: a tragic hero must be,

> between these two extremes, that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous – a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families …. The change of fortune should be not from bad to good but reversly, from good to bad (Dukore 42).

Arrow of God presents a complex plot which is synthesized through the artistic mingling of literary devices like exposition, flash-back, coincidence, surprise, suspense and dilemma. Following the stages of Ezeulu's career as a tragic hero, the plot falls into four progressive sequences, namely: the pre-exile, the exile, the return, and the catastrophe. The plot advances from the period of relative equilibrium during the pre-exile, through the crucial point of the exile, to the uneasy dilemma of the return and the conclusive sequence of the misfortune.

The opening of the story exposes Ezeulu as the highly responsible priest of the communal deity, Ulu. He keeps track of lunar events in Umuaro – the appearance of the new moon and its attendant rituals, the agricultural time table, and other related issues. He features as a prosperous priest-king, competently

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administering a polygamous household and practicing the art of justice as dictated by his divine status. However, during this period, he develops the self-conceit that portrays his sense of ambition and arrogance. These traits begin to lead him towards the desire to exercise greater authority in the community than the deity he serves:

> Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over people he wondered if it was real. It was true he named the day for the feast of the pumpkin leaves and for the New Yam feast; but he did not choose it. He was merely a watchman …. No! the chief priest of Ulu was more than that, must be more than that… (3).

The virtues of truth and justice are identified in Ezeulu, and these are underlined through a flash-back recalling an event, 'five years ago', when he testified to the white man that a land in dispute between Umuaro and Okperi belonged to the latter. Truth in this respect rather provoked antagonism from Ezeidemili and Nwaka who continue to figure as his arch enemies throughout the story.

Following the flash back, the story advances as jealousy and hostility begin to escalate against Ezeulu through his detractors. But his friends continue to admire him. Akuebue, his close friend, regularly visits and enjoys witty and humorous times with him. Winterbottom, the white colonial administrator still considers him 'an impressive-looking fetish priest who alone of all the witnesses who came before him in Okperi versus Umuaro land case spoke the truth' (59).

Ezeulu's heroic stature as a representative of his social community is highlighted by his role as scapegoat who carries away the sins of Umuaro during the feast of Pumpkin leaves. Overall, throughout the pre-exile stage, Ezeulu's challenges do not deny him of his happiness and contentment. His discourses are full of wisdom as he has appropriate answers to knotty issues, such as: the whipping of Obika, his reason for sending Oduche to the church,

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and the message from Ezeidemili concerning Oduche's locking of the python in a wooden box. In all this, Ezeulu vindicates himself as not only philosophically smart in outlook, but also emotionally stable.

The second sequence – the exile – begins with the arrival of the Court Messenger, with his escort from Okperi. When the former drops his message: 'your friend Wintabota'… 'has ordered you to appear before him tomorrow morning' (138), Obika reacts harshly, owing to what he considers impudence and disrespect for his father's status. In his response, Ezeulu arrogantly instructs the messengers to return to Okperi and inform the 'Whiteman that Ezeulu does not leave his hut' (139). His stubbornness and usual 'tone of finality' in his decisions (Ngwaba 372) are reflected in his standing his ground against going to Okperi.

Fear looms in the air, while suspense builds from the visit and departure of the messengers. When he summons a meeting of the elders to report his experience with the Court Messenger and the elders show no resolve in the matter, he travels to Okperi, where he is detained in prison, after turning down the offer of a warrant chief. He spends a total of thirty two days in Okperi. On his way back to Umuaro in the company of John Nwodika, he is thoroughly drenched by torrential rainfall.

As he contemplates the 'coming struggle' with his people (*Arrow of God* 191), and weighs the options of reconciliation and going through with the struggle, he receives the following warning from Ulu:

> 'Ta! Nwanu!' Barked Ulu in his ear, as a spirit would in the ear of an impertinent human child.
>
> 'Who told you that this was your own fight'.
>
> 'Ezeulu trembled and said nothing, his gaze lowered to the floor' (*Arrow of God* 191).

But rather than heed the warning of the deity, his hubris directs his thoughts to wrong decisions. As harvest time arrives, in utter

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disregard of the warning, Ezeulu reveals his intention to attack Umuaro at a critical period of the annual cycle of events. The new yam feast must at this time be observed before new yams can be harvested. He refuses to call the feast and remains unmoved even when the elders and titled men of Umuaro try to intervene. This deadlock becomes a dilemma for the people since hunger has begun to claim its toll with the yams in danger of being destroyed in the soil.

Meanwhile, the Christian church in Umuaro is spreading the idea that people can harvest their yams and sacrifice some of them to the Christian God who can save them from the wrath of Ulu. The people begin to comply. Ezeulu hears this from his friend Akuebue and confirms the information from his son Oduche. As if this disappointment were not enough, Obika, his son dies while performing a funeral ritual for a neighbouring family. Ezeulu is shattered and descends into madness.

The plot of *Arrow of God* therefore proves to be tragic. Ezeulu's fate evokes 'pity and terror' because he is neither eminently good nor thoroughly evil but a mixture of both. He suffers a reversal of fortune owing to his 'mistaken choice of an action' – what Dan Izevbaye describes as 'his stubborn resistance to his people and to his god' (349). And he is led to this mistake by his tragic flaw, which is pride. This pride, also interpreted as the hubris, makes him disregard both the voices of his friends, his kinsmen, elders of the land, and above all, the warnings from his god against his decision.

> Concerning the language of Greek tragedy, Aristotle posits that, Nothing contributes more to produce a clearness of diction that is remote from commonness than the lengthening, contraction and alteration of words. For by deviating in exceptional cases from the normal idiom, the language will gain distinction; while at the same time, the partial conformity with usage will give perspicuity…. (Dukore 50)

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This implies that the language of Greek tragedy seeks distinction by being remote from common speech idiom, but at the same time, does not completely avoid familiar diction for purposes of clarity and lucidity. Longinus describes such a language as sublime (Dukore 76). Nwahunanya considers the language as poetic and to have 'a concreteness and grandeur which ordinarily prose cannot transmit effectively' (20). Contrary to this view, however, the language of poetry, with its grandeur is identifiable in various forms in prose. These forms include figures of speech, figure of sound, and ritualistic speech renditions, such as chants and invocations. Hence, ordinary prose, through its incorporation of poetic devices can achieve concreteness and grandeur, as exemplified by *Arrow of God*.

The philosophical depth of Ezeulu's language is transmitted in the elevated diction of sages or legendary celebrities; classical Nigerian heroes like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo; and classical Greek heroes like Oedipus and Thyestes. Many examples of such sublime expressions can be attributed to Ezeulu: 'The death that will kill a man begins as an appetite' (*Arrow of God* 89); 'when an adult is in the house, the she goat is not left to suffer the pains of parturition on its tether (18); 'the reed we were blowing is now crushed' (26); 'our sages were right when they said 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). Many other examples of Achebe's use of vivid metaphors, alliterations and idioms abound to buttress the potency of *Arrow of God* in employing sublime, poetic, 'serious' and realistic tragic expressions.

The foregoing analysis has been able to investigate the composition of the tragic universe, the contents of the tragic tale, the tragic plot, the hero, and the language, in relation to *Arrow of God*, and found them largely in consonance with those of Greek

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tragic form. We will now examine the transcultural significance of the Greek tragic form in the novel.

The Transcultural Relevance of Greek Tragedy in *Arrow of God*

Transculturalism has been defined as the blending of elements derived from different cultures for generating new understandings. Sola Adeyemi mentions that 'the term (also referred to as cross-cultural studies or transculturation) was coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1947 to describe the phenomenon of merging and converging cultures; it is gradually being employed to create new understandings in theatre studies' (57-58).

Literature, generally, is not averse to transculturalism, hence in prose narrative, as also in theatre, this practice is a valid concern. Drama, as earlier pointed out, has crept into prose narrative. Clarifying transculturalism further, Adeyemi, citing Carl Weber, writes:

> It is 'meant to signify a transfer of culture, or intercultural exchange from one country or society to another'…. The term generally signifies a cross-cultural collaboration and appropriation which brings forth art works that combine elements from separate cultures and their indigenous artistic traditions (58)

Pointing out that 'this collaboration and appropriation involves the adoption of ideology, values, structure, contents inscribed in the predominant models for performance' Adeyemi concludes that 'transculturalism therefore fuses forms of a foreign culture with features of indigenous tradition' (58).

Transculturalism here is akin to interculturalism, which Kenneth Pickering applies to drama and theatre, involving 'the blending of material from different cultural traditions in an attempt to understand other ways of living and doing'; and 'has usually consisted of the exploration of performance styles, forms, texts and

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practices from a wide range of ethnic groups and cultures' (260). Both Adeyemi and Pickering agree that transculturalism, like interculturalism is experiment in drama and theatre.

The search for the transcultural relevance of Greek tragedy in *Arrow of God* translates to an attempt to answer the following questions: how is the blending of cultures (transculturalism) realized in the novel? Of what significance is the culture contact to the novel, especially in terms of its reception, sublimity, and cultural exposure? With what dramaturgical potentials does the mingling of Greek tragic tradition with Igbo cultural attitudes endow the novel?

The blending of Greek tragic culture and Igbo cultural materials in the novel has earlier been demonstrated here though outside the caption of transculturalism. But, precisely, a more critical transcultural approach is necessary, while avoiding unnecessary repetition. Achebe achieves transculturalism in the novel through his use of Igbo cultural materials and early colonial history to interpret the Greek concept of tragedy. These Igbo materials include world view, traditional religion, communal and familial systems, folklore, mythology, and others. The colonial history embraces the British colonial and missionary activities that are depicted in the novel. This achievement is facilitated by his working on the plot, the concept of hero, the language, and the cosmic outlook of the two entities involved in the transcultural synthesis.

Achebe builds the plot around realistic traditional Igbo experiences that were still in force during the early colonial period. Instances are the belief in deities and their potency on the living beings; the annual cycle of events, and the familial organizational systems. These experiences are portrayed in the text but they reflect the qualities of Greek tragic plot.

The protagonist Ezeulu is vividly depicted in the mould of the Greek tragic hero. His character traits, status and experiences

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represent an effective mingling of the qualities of a typical Igbo chief priest of his high position, and the features of Greek tragic hero in the mould of Oedipus. The Igbo belief in fate – as shown in the fortunes of Ezeulu – where the gods determine the fortunes of mortals, especially the punishment for people who go contrary to divine dictates – loudly sound the Greek in concept. In respect of language, traditional Igbo speech lore, proverbs, idioms, and figures of speech are attributed to major characters in the novel. This blends into the Greek tragic quest for elevated diction. Overall, this culture contact is of great significance to the novel, and has enhanced its reception. Readers who are familiar with Igbo tradition can begin to observe through the novel the universality of culture, and the receptive potentials of diverse cultures in transcultural relationships.

Most importantly, the novel can no longer be read as absolutely representing a theme of culture conflict, but can now be explored successfully for its exhibition of cultural understanding and harmony. Even where religious and political conflicts are obvious, they don't obliterate the novel's aesthetic eclecticism, and its prophetic expression of later agreement between colonial and some African interests. Transculturalism also endows the novel with a 'folkist' dramaturgical potential, as briefly displayed below.

'Folkist' Dramaturgy, Tragedy and *Arrow of God*

Attempts have been made by some playwrights to create dramatic texts from *Arrow of God,* but none of the plays is strictly based on the principles of 'folkism'. Consequently, a totally 'folkist' dramatic text, created out of this text is imperative owing to the novel's powerful dramatic indices of Greek tragedy and the Igbo folklore. The folkist approach involves 'the use in African written drama, of folk linguistic, structural and performance styles (Ukala 38). Folkism is defined by Ukala as

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> The tendency to base literary plays in the history, culture, and concerns of the folk (people in general) and to compose and perform them in accordance with African conventions for composing and performing the folk tale (285).

Hence, the techniques of African folktale performance are adopted in composing and performing folkist drama, which generally in text and in performance reflects the ways of life and history of the folks. According to M.H. Abrams, folktale refers to a short narrative in prose of unknown authorship which has been transmitted orally or 'stories invented by a known author' (124). But Sam Ukala argues that,

> The African folktale is not prose. It exists only in performance before a live audience. It therefore entails dramatic phraseology, pleasant to speak and to hear; movement, gesture impersonation, music-making and dancing; and sometimes, costuming, make-up, masking and puppetry (171).

He maintains that folktale can easily be employed in composing literary drama because it shares a lot of features in common with the literary play. Both are narratives which can be realized in performance. They are 'temporal, mimetic, interpretative and synthetic; both involve much speech' (38). In his folkist play *Akpakaland,* Ukala demonstrates how African folktale techniques can be employed in composing a purely folkist dramatic text. He applies what he calls 'the eight laws of aesthetic response', which are part of his theory of folkism. These laws are

> Law 1: The Law of opening; Law 2: The law of Joint performance; Law 3: The Law of Creativity, Free Enactment and Responsibility; Law 4: The Law of Urge to Judge; Law 5: The Law of Protest Against Suspense; Law 6: The Law of the Expression of the Emotions; Law 7: The Law of Ego Projection; Law 8: The Law of closing (33).

Most of the laws are applied in the above folk script. Law 1 is applied as the play opens, with the folktale method of introducing

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the subject matter and characters of the story. This arouses audience interest and involves them in the opening song and dance. Example:

Lu n'ilu Tell a tale
Ilu Nwokoro Tale about Nwokoro
Do n'udo Tug at the rope
Udo kpiri-kpiri Rope kpiri-kpiri (*Akpakaland* 13)

A narrator is involved and his role is clearly indicated in the script.

Law 2 is observed in the play through the playwright's composition of some lines in such a way that the audience can participate in completing them for the narrator when necessary. For example: When the narrator says:

> … when there is a dispute between the influential rich and the wretched poor, who supports the poor? (*Akpakaland* 34)

The audience completes the line: 'No one' (35).

Apart from this completion of line, Law 2 is also observed through dance, music, dialogue, and song in which the audience is involved.

Law 3 is observed through the updating of old tales with contemporary experiences. These experiences are obvious in the dialogue. Example Akpaka, the protagonist, is described in modern terms as 'president'; he is said to have chosen his wives as a way of distributing national resources (13). The narrator is free to invite any audience member to the stage, and he can also switch to role playing when the need arises. Also he is given opportunity to improvise. Law 4 is manifested where the audience throws expressions in between the lines, judging and commenting on the characters' skills or ethics. For example, when other wives of Akpaka guffaw beside Unata during her agony, members of the audience pass judgement as follows: 'Foolish people! So you now support Fulama? (*Akpakaland* 34).

Law 5 is applied when the audience throws questions to the narrator in order to move the action and relieve suspense. Example:

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M.O.A: (Raising hand) Storyteller, I have a question (35).

Nar: Please, ask it.

M.O.A: How may the poor unite and seize power? (35)

Law 6 is demonstrated through members of the audience's free expression of their feelings such as surprise, fear or pity. For example when Fulama informs Akpaka that his favourite wife has a tail, the members of the audience express their surprise: 'A tail'? (14).

Law 7 is shown in interjectory comments on the performance by the audience; for instance, when the narrator tells the story of the impending striptease of Akpaka's wife, and concludes his story with the expression 'Everyone sharpened his eyes against the day'. (*Akpakaland* 29). The MOA (members of the audience) interject: Hm! They'll see pictures, I swear! (29)

Law 8 is observed when the performer of the tale makes 'valedictory statements on the morals of the tales, using closing formula, and the audience responds with a concluding applause, commendation or disapproval' (Enita 56). In *Akpakaland*, the conclusion is as follows:

Nar: From there I went from there I returned o!

Aud: Welcome-o!

Nar: (With a bow) Ee! (56)

These laws are also applicable in adapting the novel, *Arrow of God*, to a folk script, bearing in mind the significant roles of the narrator, the actors, MOA, the public audience, and the overall participatory nature of all concerned in the performance. And these are reflected in the stage directions of the folk script.

Since the novel concerns the tragedy of Ezeulu in Umuaro community, the key conflicts and dramatic incidents are carefully selected and assembled into a storyline, then a unified plot. This plot, in accordance with the tragic inclination of the novel, should portray how the chief priest suffers a change of fortune, due to hubris. The particular themes of the novel to be highlighted,

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determine the plot – how the incidents should be arranged and which actions should be highlighted more than the others. For instance, before Ezeulu's exile, dramatic incidents are: the announcement of the new moon; Ezeulu's consideration of his powers; meeting of Umuaro to determine whether to send emissaries of war or peace to Okperi; Winterbottom's interaction with John Nwodika; and Mr Goodcountry's activities in the church. Others are Winterbottom's encounter with the labourers, the Pumpkin Leaves Festival, and Ezeulu's re-enactment of Ulu's first coming. Other conflicts and dramatic incidents are identifiable in the second, third and fourth movements of the story.

The themes that can determine the plot are the ideas of change, leadership and its challenges, suppression of traditional institutions by colonial forces, and possibilities of intercultural relationship. Characterization in the dramatic version remains consistent with the provisions of the novel. Work must be done on the characters' lines by way of cutting off or adding words for purposes of ensuring dramatic dialogue. Appropriate traditional music, songs and dances should be integrated into the scenes in accordance with the practice in folktale composition and performance.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to exhibit the Greek tragic quality of Achebe's *Arrow of God,* showing how this has promoted the transcultural credit of the text. In addition, the involvement of tragedy as dramatic genre has been vindicated as a lead impetus in the possible adaptation of the novel, not only to a conventional modern African drama but also to a new literary dramatic model, based on the theory of folkism, and is known severally as folkist drama, folkist play or folk script. An existing example of a folk script is given as Sam Ukala's *Akpakaland,* which provides a formula with which an attempt has been made here to show how *Arrow of God* can be adapted to a folk script. Overall, therefore, this paper

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has demonstrated how the Greek sense of the tragic has fertilized transculturalism, and by this, avails its dramatic essence to the novel for dramatization.

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