

A Question of Power: the Leadership Question: Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, and the Global Future

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Introduction

It is widely claimed, at least by many scholars of African writing, even by literary journalists, that Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) is one of the greatest writers in the African literary canon. *Arrow of God*, the subject of this essay, should be understood as being part of the oeuvre of Achebe, in which he produced a series of compelling narrative descriptions of African life that introduce the modern literary reader to an African Community in transition, a community that is nonetheless rife with contradictions and painful mutations, all in an attempt to explore the wider order of things in the African context.

A Question of Power

The plot of *Arrow of God* revolves around the Chief Priest, Ezeulu. The figure of Ezeulu is the literary device by which Achebe sets up the confrontation between a native, non-Western culture and political order and a rising and dominating colonial power, in the form of Christianity and its proselytizing priest and colonial authority figures, who are out to impose their own ethos and European Enlightenment values such as personal liberty and the right to a private self-distinct from communal consciousness.

As we see in the novel, the major combatant native towns, Umuaro and Okperi, and protagonists such as Ezeulu and Ezidemili

on the one hand and colonial figures such as Mr. Winterbottom and Mr. Goodcountry on the other are involved in constant, never-ending struggle for power. In the first group, it is a battle for supremacy within the native institutions; in the second group, it is a struggle for dominance one way or the other, whether it be through the Church and its own theological need for transcendence (namely that its 'god' is not of this world, hence the need for the native to be in touch with something 'deep') or through the institutions of secular modernity which colonial culture inaugurates by a recourse to modernity, which requires that natives live by the new order of bureaucracy, taxation, public projects, and the state system in which one could have the promise of citizenship and the political protection of the State.

In a sense, then, whether the colonial order had emerged or not, life in traditional Igbo society, at least as represented in *Arrow of God* and in the six villages, would evolve around *the endless struggle for domination* among competing centres of power, either of Ezeulu or Ezidemili, either of Mr. Winterbottom or Nwaka. This means that we should not view the struggle between, say, Ezeulu and Mr. Winterbottom, as simply that between an authentic native culture and an inauthentic and intrusive foreign culture. Rather, as we see in the struggle between Ezeulu and Nwaka, or even between Umuaro and Okperi, the nature of the human world is one of endless 'will to power'. *Whether the European colonial official was there in Umuaro or Okperi or not, the basic tendency in those societies is the basic tendency of all forces and configurations of forces, local or foreign, colonial or domestic, to extend their influence and dominate others.*

This is why it would be problematic to say, in any case, that *Arrow of God* is a political and cultural novel that has captured the clash of two cultures and inability of these cultures to contend peaceably despite their differences. Things are not that simple and clear cut: there are no clear cut differences on either side; or rather, there is similarity and difference on both sides, as we see in the conflict

between Umuaro and Okperi, between Nwaka and Ezeulu, and between Edogo and Oduche. Without the colonial intervention, one side would have obliterated the other, or, at least, one side would have emerged as the dominant power. We can see, then, from this perspective, that Achebe in *Arrow of God* cannot be said to have simply portrayed the disrupting effect that the externally imposed power system (the British) has had on an internally imposed power system (African tradition and customs). Equally, it is not the case that Achebe has portrayed the true colours of colonialism as it walked over existing traditions, destroyed age-long customs, and shattered norms, mores, and lores if only to institute its authority more firmly. Rather, indigenous people such as Nwaka, Ezidemili, even Ezeulu's sons such as Edogo and Nwafo, would have wrestled power from Ezeulu, or eventually Ezeulu from Ezidemili or Nwaka, or, indeed, all the contending native forces would have destroyed themselves in the process. This picture has a critical and crucial implication for a nation such as ours that is struggling to re-define national unity and togetherness.

Consider also the case of Ezeulu: although he thinks that his real battle is with his own people, not with 'the white man', the British colonialist and Christian missionary at all; and although he sees Nwaka as challenging the authority of Ulu, and the people spitting on him (Ezeulu), saying he is the priest of a dead god, Ezeulu still hopes for revenge not on the colonial or Christian figures but on his own people, by hoping, for example, that Captain Winterbottom would detain him for a long time, so that he can better plan his revenge against his own kinsmen. This battle is a lost one from the start because Achebe, talking about the Igbo cosmogony in *Chi in Igbo Cosmology* argues that 'No man however great can win judgment against all the people'¹.

Consider also Ezeulu's behaviour when he returns home from detention. While everybody is glad to see him again, he secretly directs his anger against his people ostensibly because of their

declining reverence towards his guardian god, Ulu, but in reality, for their declining respect for his position as Chief Priest. This is why Ezeulu's cavalier attitude towards the Feast of the New Yam is powerfully symbolic of his 'will-to-power': Ezeulu tells his compatriots that he has only three sacred yams left. He can't announce the Feast of the New Yam until he has finished eating all the sacred yams. He was unable to eat the sacred yams while imprisoned in Okperi, and now he has to follow the rules — one yam a month. The people are horrified at Ezeulu's irrational and outrageous decision. If they wait three months before they are allowed to harvest their crops, the crops will be ruined and the people of Umuaro will suffer widespread famine as a result. It is this singular lack of leadership vision and acumen, and the absolute lack of sense of responsibility on the part of Ezeulu that the Colonial establishment exploits, with far-reaching consequences.

Let us say, then, that at least in *Arrow of God*, native Igbo society wallows in the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the occasionally contingent, even though it does not disintegrate into disaster or fizzle out into nothingness. All the same, the indigenous society in *Arrow of God* simply moves over to the new colonial-Christian formation, to the new way of talking and doing things. In such a society, the old will-to-power gives way to the new one; Ulu gives way to the Christian God, and the worship of Ulu or Idemili gives way to the Christian Church and the new Colonial-Military Bureaucracy headed by Captain Winterbottom. And just as the new re-orientation has claimed even Ezeulu's son, whom the father is willing to defend despite his well-known desecration of the royal python (against Ezidemili), this led to, in the end, and at least for the natives of the six or seven villages, the early and swift assimilation of Western, European values and beliefs.

A Question of Leadership

It is commonly held in the academic discussion of *Arrow of God* that Ezeulu's loss of power (both spiritual and temporal), or the correlative usurpation of power by Captain Winterbottom, is analogous to the eventual loss of the Igbo cultural identity, and, by extension, the political identity of the Nigerian nation as a whole. Perhaps we should pause here to look at the quality of leadership that the key native characters in that novel, Ezeulu, Ezidemili, and Nwaka, for example, have got to offer to their community. In the first place, Ezeulu lacks diplomatic intelligence, for he would have acted differently in his attitude towards the war between Umuaro and Okperi. Second, he simply passes himself off as the only man who knows and acts out the truth, and whose wisdom is absolute, relative to the rest of the followership, and this eventually leads to his downfall. And although Ezidemili is assertive, he does so only in pursuit of his self-interests, or where he thinks some power and influence might accrue to him. Nwaka is even less emotionally intelligent, obsessed only with self-gain, or showing determination only in those contexts in which his self-interest would be served, even if it is against the general welfare of the community.

On the other hand, however, the Christian and colonial characters, from Winterbottom to Goodcountry show real and good leadership skills as we know them in the modern world, namely determination to achieve their goal of spiritual and political conquest of the native culture, energy, assertiveness, intuitive and cognitive intelligence, and dogged perseverance in pursuit of their own ends, including the emotional and political skills in exploiting local divisions in order to realize their projects. Consider, as an example, the disastrous decision of Ezeulu to delay the beginning of the celebration for the Feast of the New Yam, which John Goodcountry exploits in order to undermine the whole efficacy of local customs. *So, while Ezeulu and Ezidemili lack, on the whole, good judgment and intelligent, critical foresight, Captain Winterbottom and Mr. John Goodcountry show traits of modern leadership such as tactical*

flexibility, single-minded pursuit of their objectives, competitiveness, cognitive capacity such as intelligence, analytical and verbal ability, behavioral flexibility, and good judgment. Armed with these leadership traits, the colonial establishment and Christian theological authority figures are able, unlike Ezeulu and Nwaka, for example, to formulate solutions to difficult problems, adapt to changing situations, and create well-thought-out plans for their future dominance.

We could thus say that the native leaders such as Ezeulu and Ezidemili lack the essential traits of emotional stability for building community trust, cultural and ideological consistency and dependable loyalty to the community apart from the lures of self-interest. It is their lack of these traits that the colonial machine exploits in order to undermine the whole edifice of local independence. As we can see in the novel, the squabbling local spiritual and political leaders fail to see the greater danger ahead, and only realize the implications of their action when it is too late.

Clearly, then, *Arrow of God* explores, or is a fictional and narrative presentation of, the question of power and leadership as exercised by elite groups in a community, as reflected in the character of Ezeulu, Ezidemili, Nwaka, Winterbottom and Goodcountry. Notice that all Ezeulu, Nwaka, Ezidemili, Winterbottom, and Goodcountry can do is literally manipulate groups, individuals, and whole villages. Notice also that Ezeulu fails to take harsh action against his son, Oduche, for desecrating the royal python, despite the possibility that the very action could precipitate wholesale demystification of the very 'system' on which Ezeulu's prestige and communal relevance depend.

We could thus say that Ezeulu, Ezidemili, Winterbottom, and Goodcountry are all, despite their racial, cultural, ideological, and political differences, people of powerfully egoistic wills; each one of these men is capable of leadership, when the situation demands; each is in the end, driven by egoistic action. In other words, none

of them, native or expatriate, indigenous or foreign, is capable of good leadership, in the final analysis, if by leadership we mean 'concern for the people', and 'a non-egoistic concern for a community's overall goal-achievement', and 'the positive reinforcement of a community or a society's well-being'.

Thus to use our modern parlance, none of the central characters in *Arrow of God*, from the native to the colonial ones are, inherently democratic in their thought and action, and none is even capable of imagining the modern idea of a shared, motivating group purpose for the common good of all; none has the modern notion of collective unity or team spirit on which the modern concepts of democracy and national development are based, although Captain Winterbottom and John Goodcountry are capable of collective unity and team spirit, two concepts that colonial discourse has relied upon in varying degrees in its conquest of the non-Western world.

This is why when it comes to what may be called 'inappropriate exercise of power and leadership', both the colonizer and the colonized are one and the same, are only two sides of a coin. Chinua Achebe in a lecture he delivered in Cambridge in 2010 captures the antipathy of his Igbo Community towards traditional kingship. He argues that the Igbo express 'a strong anti-monarchy sentiment with the common name Ezebuilo, which translates to 'a being is an enemy'. He further illustrates, 'There is no doubt that they experienced the high-handedness of kings, so they decided that a being cannot be a trusted friend of the people...'².

A Question of Literature

Now is the time to pause and draw the full implications of the fact that *Arrow of God* is a fictional work, a work of literature, not a sociological or documentary text. As fiction, the events depicted in the novel are not real, may never have happened, and is, thus, only a *symbolic* representation of an imaginary idea, the metaphorical

representation of a certain historical experience, the experience of colonialism.

This is where, in my view, the reader of this novel has to do some deconstructive interpretive work: where does the (flying) 'arrow', the theme of the novel, land, as it were, in the end? In the praxis of a theological cosmology in which there is Believer and Infidel (Ezeulu versus Goodcountry) or the old, inherited cultural cosmogony in which the human and the natural are one (Ezeulu *and* Ezidemili)? Perhaps the real author, Achebe, may have set out to vindicate the traditional Igbo way of life, with all its pristine supposed cosmogony. Yet the narrator presents the old native cultural formation as being justly and fairly regarded as bad or as (having) something to be ashamed of, and as riddled with internal and inherent contradictions.

Surely, the real author (Achebe) and the (unnamed) narrator (or narrators) of the novel must have different intentions, if we may call them so: one wants to vindicate the pre-Christian Igbo way of life; the other the Christian-Colonial way of life (witness the ease with which the people of Umuaro and Okperi accept the facile pronouncements of Mr. Good country). In other words, despite the real author (Achebe) and the (omniscient) narrator, both worlds are shown as having their own internal consistency, their own normativity, their own justification and rationality. For example, how could Ezeulu delay the start of the Feast of the New Yam? And who wouldn't accept Goodcountry's rational solution to Ezeulu's thoughtless action?

Conclusion

I would like to close this essay with the remark that *Arrow of God* is a narration of a crucial moment at which Western or European culture, technology, religion, and military prowess triumph over a specific indigenous community. Yet, the novel also speaks to other African or Nigerian communities because they too, eventually, fell

prey to the same invading forces, but with different internal and historical results. The point is that, in this era of the increasing globalization of cultures, faiths, technologies, and institutions, *Arrow of God* shows us the beginnings of this process in one small corner of the world, but which, through the same historical processes, now has significance for all peoples and cultures, since these worlds and communities are becoming interconnected. But this is just why no community should think that it can opt out of a federation with others, either at the level of the nation-state or the world system itself. This, in my view, is the significance of the story in *Arrow of God*, namely that just as the Ezeulus and the Ezidemilis cannot, or fail to, hold their own in the face of the New, so their ancestors, real or mythical, cannot, and should not, fail to heed the warning in the story— *that no community or ethnic group can afford to live by its own resources or wits alone, but must find its future in a fraternity of modern institutions such as the Nation, Democracy, Good Governance, and Responsible Leadership, among others.*

Being a classic, *Arrow of God* speaks both to the past and to the present of Achebe's Nigeria, which recently engaged in a National Conference at which issues such as Resource Control, State Police, 'Fiscal' Federalism, Regionalism, Multiple Electoral challenges and Insecurity were rigorously discussed.

It is hoped that the debates during the National Conference would assist in ushering in a new and equitable society characterized by good governance, prosperity and national cohesion. The National Conference delegates should, in the words of Jean Herskovits in another context examine Nigeria's basic questions:

'With intellectual rigor... they will have to look for unexpected consequences. They will have to make hard choices and get their fellow Nigerians to go along. And they will have to insist on raising education to the highest priority. Without it, as the 21st Century's globalized world keeps changing ever more

rapidly, Nigerians in Nigeria will be left with ever fewer opportunities³

It is also hoped that this new window will not go down as one of the 'litany of missed opportunities'⁴ that this country has had since its Independence.

Endnotes

1. Chinua Achebe, *Morning yet on Creation Day: Essays*. London: Heinemann (1975), p.99.
2. 'Nigeria's Promise, Africa's Hope', A Transcript of a speech delivered by Chinua Achebe in Cambridge in November, 2010.
3. 'Reflections on fifty years of change in Nigeria, A transcript of a paper read by Professor Jean Herskovits at the Coventry, University African Studies Centre – Chatham House, Africa Programme Conference: Nigeria: the Biggest and the Best 50 Years of Independence: p.3.
4. Jean Herskovits, p.15.