

Ezeulu's Extreme Individualism and the Offended Gods in Achebe's *Arrow of God*

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Abstract

Gods are God(s) and they remain so in all religions be they Traditionalism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc. and consequently, God(s) exert unquestionable authority over mankind, from the cradle to the grave. Whoever thinks or tries to manipulate their awesome powers, no matter the reason, does so at his/her own peril. It is in the light of this that this paper takes a dispassionate view of Achebe's Ezeulu and the traditional religion that is at war with the Christian religion for the soul of Umuaro, thereby confirming the old age-old wisdom that there is a divinity that shapes our ends.

Introduction

The note is early struck in the search for 'signs of the new moon' (1) and Ezeulu's beating of his *ogene* 'GOME GOME GOME GOME ...' to welcome the new moon and in the children's spontaneous chorus of 'Onwa atuo!... Onwa atuo!... Onwa atuo (the moon has appeared)' (2). At this time, Ezeulu is at peace with himself even though the forces that threaten the cohesiveness of Okonkwo's Umuofia are already entrenched in Ezeulu's Umuaro – a political commonwealth of six autonomous villages made up of Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezeani, Umuogwugwu, Umuisiuzo, and Umuachala in that ancient order. These forces include the colonial administration with its law courts, the Christian Mission with its God, its local school, and its trading stores. These forces notwithstanding, the rampage of Abam slave-raiders has necessitated the creation of Ulu,

an upstart god of security, over and above other autochthonous gods of Umuaro – a situation most repugnant to Idemili, Ogwugwu, Eru, and Udo that have been relegated to subordinate status. The priests of these gods are equally involved, though indirectly in the battle or politics of the Pantheon.

It is, however, the human angle that precipitates the crisis with Ezeulu, Ogbuefi Nwaka, and Ofoka as contestants. This angle is three-dimensional: firstly, the conflict between priests of older gods and Ezeulu; secondly, the conflict between the colonial administration and Ezeulu – the representative of the traditional sacred order; and thirdly, the personal conflict that takes place in Ezeulu's mind and influences his overreactions to issues of the moment as well as draws the anger of *Ulu* against Ezeulu. Above all, there is the most crucial intervention of *Fate* and *Chance*. It is through this last factor that *Chi* the personal god and *Agwu* step in and control the destiny of Ezeulu, of his upstart deity, *Ulu*, and of the traditional order of Umuaro.

Ezeulu's Love for Power

It is George Orwell who tells us that 'Power intoxicates and absolute power intoxicates absolutely' (Nineteen Eighty-Four). And that is the problem of Ezeulu. As he waits for the fourth sacred yam to roast on the fire, Ezeulu considers the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and therefore over the people of Umuaro. He wonders if his power is real, for neither the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves nor the New Yam feast could hold without his announcing it. Achebe tells us that:

His power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his. As long as the goat was alive it could be his; he would find it food and take care of it. But on the day it was slaughtered he would know soon enough who the real owner was ... if he should refuse to name the day there would

be no festival no planting and no reaping. But could he refuse. No Chief Priest has ever refused (3).

In his heart of hearts, Ezeulu tells himself that 'No man in Umuaro can stand up and say that I dare not' (3). He forgets that his major role as a chief priest is to perform the rituals of Ulu but not to dictate or impose his own will on Ulu and the people of Umuaro.

Fate and the gods have several ways of testing heroes. Ezeulu survives one of such tests when in spite of all odds, he honestly witnesses against his own clan in their land dispute with Okperi, stating that the land in contention belongs to Okperi instead of his people Umuaro. Circumstances like this and others establish Ezeulu as one of the greatest men of truth in Umuaro according to Captain Winterbottom. For this, some people like Ogbuefi Nwaka hate Ezeulu.

But within the clan, Ezeulu is hailed as 'half-man, half-spirit' – a metaphor which he dramatizes during the Festival of the First Pumpkin Leaves when half his body, the spirit aspect is painted in white chalk. During this occasion he reenacts the myth of the First Coming of Ulu in Umuaro (Jabbi 131), and how each of the four days of the Igbo week or markets – Eke, Oye, Afor, Nkwo – puts obstacles on his way as he and Ulu make the great deity's first epiphany.

Like most heroes in mythopoesis, Ezeulu's ambition is to achieve greatness to consolidate that semi-divine greatness ascribed to him and to rid Umuaro body politic of all divisive forces that militate against the corporate existence of the clan. However, Ogbuefi Nwaka would not let him, denying Ezeulu the co-operation and consent of the clan towards his seemingly unusual invitation by the colonial administrator Captain Winterbottom. Nwaka tells the elders' assembly:

Is this the first time Ezeulu would be going to Okperi? Who was the white man's witness that year we fought for our land – and lost? (144).

To Nwokeke Nnabenyi who suggests that six elders representing the six villages of the commonwealth should be chosen to go with Ezeulu to Okperi, Ogbuefi Nwaka interjects: 'you may go with him if your feet are hungry for a walk'. Consequently, the assembly breaks up in confusion. Only Ezeulu's half-brother, Okeke Onenyi and his friend Akuebue offer to go with him but he refuses.

Out of spite, Ezeulu's antagonist Ogbuefi Nwaka and Umuaro in general have forgotten one basic fact: that Ezeulu, the Chief Priest is a 'divine' person, a source of danger as well as of blessing to the clan. He must not only be guarded, he must also be guarded against (Frazer, *The Golden Bough* 267). His absence could spell religious, social, and economic disaster for Umuaro. It does really happen in the end.

Ezeulu's Encounter with the Colonial Administration

In spite of the nonchalant attitude of Umuaro, Ezeulu sets out to Okperi to answer the white man's call. Some malicious fate however intervenes. Captain Winterbottom's illness leaves the administration in the hands of an incompetent deputy: Tony Clarke who, because of Ezeulu's intransigence ('Tell the white man that Ezeulu will not be anybody's chief, except Ulu' (215)) detains the Chief Priest for more than 'two moons'. Inwardly Ezeulu is happy for his deity not seeing him in his sacerdotal office would ask Umuaro questions.

But Ezeulu and the white man are so engrossed with the myths of their different high offices that none cares to understand the other's myth. The crisis that Ezeulu would have averted by not leaving Umuaro has erupted, and Umuaro have no immediate solution to offer. Ezeulu, however, does not quarrel with his detention by the colonial authorities. His quarrel is with his own people, Umuaro, and 'the white man is, without knowing it, his ally'. His detention has provided him material resources for the oncoming fight with Umuaro. The terrible heavy rain on his way back

is another. In this heart Ezeulu prepares to teach Umuaro a punitive lesson for all the sufferings he has been exposed to.

Ezeulu's Revenge Mania and the Prophetic Dream

Ezeulu returns to a confused Umuaro prepared to deal with his enemies. But he fails to appreciate the full implications of his prophetic dream while in detention at Okperi. The novelist tells us:

That night Ezeulu saw in a dream a big assembly of Umuaro elders ... but instead of himself, it was his grand-father who rose to speak to them. They refuse 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 warriors of Abam but he cannot save us from the white men. Let us drive him away as our neighbours of Aninta drove out and burnt *Ogba* when he ... turned round to kill the people of Aninta instead of their enemies'. 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 (196 – 7).

The interpretation is simple: it foreshadows Ezeulu's oncoming tragedy and that of his god, *Ulu* and by implication that of the traditional religion and the cohesiveness of the clan.

Blinded by his irascible persecution mania, a sort of *Agwu*, Ezeulu forgets that the responsibility of his priesthood is to go ahead and confront danger before it reaches his people as he demonstrates annually during each Festival of Pumpkin Leaves when he re-enacts the myth of the First Coming of *Ulu* in Umuaro. As far as he is concerned, 'the fight would not begin until the time of harvest after three moons more' (240) when he plans to hit Umuaro when they are most helpless. But the deity *Ulu* promptly reprimands Ezeulu for this.

'Ta! Nwanu!' barked Ulu into his ear. As a spirit would in the ear of an impertinent child. 'Who told you that this was your own fight? ... 'Beware you do not come between me and my victim or you may receive blows not meant for you!' (240 – 1).

Ezeulu's bitterness against Umuaro is traceable to his antagonism with Ogbuefi Nwaka who hides under the protection of their village deity *Idemili* and attacks Ezeulu and Ulu continuously. Referring to the politics of the pantheon, *Ulu* warns his Chief Priest:

'Do you not know what happens when two elephants fight? Go home and sleep and leave me to settle my quarrel with *Idemili* who wants to destroy me so that his python may come to power' (241).

From the above, it is obvious that the oncoming fight will be 'a fight of the gods'; humans therefore should keep off. But not Ezeulu. He already sees himself and his Christian son Oduche as 'arrows in the bow of his god' (241) – an idea that intoxicates him like palm wine. Soon after, the effect of *Ulu's* warning is lost on Ezeulu as he prepares to 'hit Umuaro at its most vulnerable point – the Feast of the New Yam' (253). But as Ezeulu and *Ulu* spoil for a fight, the Christian God seems to have taken over. The sacred python, the totemic symbol of *Idemili* now runs away '*fiam* like an ordinary snake' (247) at the sight of a Christian.

When it becomes clear that Ezeulu wants to withhold the Feast of the New Yam for two more 'moons' to make room for his two ritual yams left uneaten, ten elders of the clan approach him and state unequivocally:

Umuaro is now asking you to go and eat those remaining yams today and name the day of the next harvest ... and if *Ulu* says we have committed an abomination let it be on the heads of the ten of us here. You will be free because we have set you to it, and the person who sets a child to catch a shrew should also find water for him to wash the odour from his hand ...

these are not the times we used to know and we must meet them as they come or be rolled in the dust (260).

Ezeulu refuses in order to advance his vengeful mania. He tells the ten elders: 'I am the Chief Priest of *Ulu* and what I have told you is not mine.... The gods sometimes use us as a whip' (261).

Within Umuaro traditional sacred order, however, moons do not just appear and disappear in the sky. Events like the ritual eating of the sacred yams concretize their passage from 'profane time, ordinary temporary duration in which acts without religious meaning have their setting' (Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* 68) to sacred time, the time of festivals and occasional rituals. But accidental failure to observe the moon ritual could not have been serious enough to destroy the traditional order if Ezeulu had not vengefully arrogated to himself more powers than his deity would have approved for him as a mere servant or agent of a god.

'No Man however Great is Greater than his People'

In spite of the ten elders' attitude of conciliation, telling Ezeulu to go back and tell the deity that they have heard his grievance and are prepared to make amends, (for) every offence has its sacrifice, from a few cowries to a cow or a human being (261), Ezeulu fails to understand that emergency situations call for emergency decisions and actions. The mythic philosophy is simple: if Ezeulu refuses to ask for the sacrifice which Umuaro are willing to offer, he is inadvertently asking to be the sacrificial victim which he soon becomes. He forgets that the myth of *Ulu* is rooted in the general weal of Umuaro. The same general weal of Umuaro now dictates that for the welfare of the clan, something quite unorthodox should be done to save their harvest and the traditional order.

The ten titled elders who meet Ezeulu represent the past, the present, and the future generations of Umuaro. In other words, the myth of the creation of *Ulu* and Umuaro is, as it were, being reenacted there and then; but Ezeulu remains obstinate saying:

'You are asking me to eat death'. When a priest works against the same myth that establishes and legitimizes his own deity as well as institutionalizes his own sacerdotal office he is asking for the demise of his god and himself. When a god of security can no longer protect its people, it is like Ogba of Aninta asking to be burnt, and replaced by another deity that promises satisfaction (Obiechina 228).

With the present state of affairs in Umuaro and the subterranean influence of the white man's god, it does appear likely that Christianity will step into Ulu's position and it is very unlikely that Ezeulu will ever have a hand in the rituals of the new god. Ogbuefi Nwaka summarizes it better when he states that Ezeulu 'has caught his mother's madness' and that 'a priest like Ezeulu leads a god to ruin himself' (266).

That soon happens. A shattering blow is soon delivered by the tragic death of Obika, Ezeulu's son and the one he loves most and who resembles him. In a pietist language of god-abandonment (Soyinka 95), Ezeulu cries out: 'Ulu, were you there when this happened to me' (284-5). He slumps down beside Obika's body and his mind goes blank. Symbolically, he is dead. His tragedy, like that of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, is not that of himself alone but that of the entire traditional order.

The Christian Church as if by a *deus ex machina* promptly calls Ezeulu's bluff, by sanctifying Umuaro's harvest. The Chief Priest's action therefore boomerangs, destroying him in the process but reinforces the age-old aphorism that 'no man however great is greater than his people', and that the messenger (Ezeulu) is never greater than the Umuaro that sends him, and that 'no one ever won judgment against his clan'. The great novelist, Achebe concludes it nicely by stating:

'If this was so then Ulu has chosen a dangerous time to uphold that truth for in destroying his priest, he has brought disaster on himself'(287).

If Ezeulu had known, his tragedy would have been avoided. In place of all the autochthonous gods of Umuaro – Idemili, Ogwugwu, Eru, Ulu, and Agwu - the God of the Christian religion takes over and the old order in Umuaro changes, yielding place to the new.

Conclusion

Taking a retrospective view of issues in *Arrow of God*, one may rightly conclude that by inadvertently destroying himself and, as it were, handing over the harvest and the traditional religion of Umuaro to the Christian God, Ezeulu has offended the gods of Umuaro namely: Ulu, Eru, Ogwugwu, and Idemili. The most offended is Ulu who, in spite of an earlier mystic warning to Ezeulu to steer clear, is now ruined. Ulu no longer has a priest and its worshippers now turn to the rituals of the Christian God, considered in the past as an alien god.

Eru, Ogwugwu, and Idemili whose python runs away '*fiam*' on sighting a Christian have never been happy with their subordinate status in Umuaro, no longer have any status at all. Not only that they are offended, their existence no longer matters. Ogbuefi Nwaka and his Ezidemili who threaten the burning of Ulu the way Aninta people burnt Ogba, can no longer boast with Idemili and its python, for something bigger than *nte* (an insignificant insect) has completely sealed the earth-hole of the *nte*. This is what happens when brothers fight over their inheritance: a stranger takes it from them.

As for '*Chi*', the personal god of Ezeulu who destines Ezeulu for greatness over and above all Umuaro in spite of the fact that Ezeulu is from the least important village (Umuachala) in Umuaro, he is offended. Ezeulu's matter is the case of a man whose *Chi* says 'yes' but he himself acts to the contrary. Ezeulu's *Chi* deserts him when Ezeulu's vengeance mania closes his mind and ears to mystic warnings. He listens to nobody, but to his own ego, and

consequently perishes. As the saying goes, 'nobody wrestles with his *Chi*' and wins.

One may tend to blame it all on 'Agwu', the god of eccentricity and madness. As Ogbuefi Nwaka would say, 'Ezeulu has inherited the madness of his mother'. Madness can run in families, through blood inheritance. It makes someone oblivious of circumstances around himself. That exactly is what happens to Ezeulu. He listens to nobody but himself and this is where *Fate* comes in. Nothing could save him; not the mystic voice of Ulu, the intervention of the ten elders of Umuaro, nor the warning by Obika's mother: 'I want you to go and talk to your father ... Are you a stranger in Umuaro? Do you not see the trouble that is coming?' (212). Ezeulu ignores the gods to his own peril and to the peril of all the gods in Umuaro. In spite of all the recriminations between Ezeulu and Ogbuefi Nwaka, Ulu and Idemili together with other autochthonous gods (Eru and Ogwugwu) of Umuaro, it is the Christian God that takes over the harvest and soul of Umuaro.

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