

## ‘When Brothers Fight to Death’: Internal Conflicts and the Tragic Resolution of *Arrow of God*

**Remy Oriaku**

University of Ibadan, Nigeria

It can be argued that of all the novels of Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* is perhaps the most consciously crafted. Coming after *Things Fall Apart* with its central motif of the agency of European intrusion in the undermining of the indigenous cultural order and *No Longer at Ease* which highlights the prevalent new order of disquietude that came in the wake of the establishment of British rule, *Arrow of God* is a re-assessment narrative – a novel in which the world of *Things Fall Apart* is modified and expanded and *No Longer at Ease* is better anticipated. If the indigenous order is wrecked when the external enemy cleverly ‘put a knife on the things’ that held the indigenous community together, *Arrow of God* posits that Umuaro was ruined by other factors principal among which is a concatenation of internal conflicts. Using a blend of formalist and Marxist readings of *Arrow of God*, this paper will argue that in this novel Achebe is of the view that the ascendancy of the Euro-Christian order in the colonial encounter is attributable more to the related enmities among the indigenous people than to the wiles of the British intruders.

Chinua Achebe’s great talent in the use of proverbs and anecdotes is evident in both the fictions and polemical writings. He opens the ‘Preface to Second Edition’ of *Arrow of God* with his dilemma at being asked which of his novels is his favourite and says it ‘is fully comparable to asking a man to list his children in the order in which he loves them.’ He goes on to say that *Arrow of God* has the distinction of being ‘the novel which [he] may be caught sitting

down to read again.' It was apparently in the course of re-reading it that he observed 'certain structural weaknesses' which prompted a revision of the novel. This is the only known case of Achebe's revision of his novels.

Elaborating on the dilemma of the father who had been asked to hierarchise his love for his children Achebe says: 'A paterfamilias worth his salt will, if he must, speak about the peculiar attractiveness of each child.' Just as it is often difficult for a man to express preference for one of his children over all the others, it is no less difficult for a writer to rank his works. Together they define his achievement, his stature in the comity of writers. Even then, each of them will have its significance based on its impact and the critical assessment of its themes and features.

A man's perception of 'the peculiar attractiveness' of each of his children is often conditioned by what other people say about these children, especially inasmuch as each of these children is assumed to be a scion of the parent(s). The uneasy relationship creative writers have with their critics is well known and has been novelized by William Golding in *The Paper Men*. The unease notwithstanding, the writer and his critic can have a mutually beneficial relationship. In the same way that a father would want to guide the personality formation of his child by noting the public image of the child, the critics' views help the writer improve on his craft. Achebe himself has dramatized this in the scene in Chapter Seventeen of *Arrow of God* where a new ancestral Mask is to be presented to the village by Obika's Otakagu age group. Towards the end of the chapter the focus shifts from the Mask to its carver, Edogo. The narrator says about him:

Although Edogo could have taken one of the back seats in the *okwolo* he chose to stand with the crowd so as to see the Mask from different positions. When he had finished carving the face and head he had been a little disappointed. There was something about the nose which did not please him – a certain

fineness which belonged not to an Agaba but to a Maiden Spirit. But the owners of the work had not complained; in fact they had praised it very highly. Edogo knew, however, that he must see the Mask in action to know whether it was good or bad. So he stood with the crowd.... Edogo went from one part of the crowd to another in the hope that someone would make the comparison he wanted to hear, but no one did. Many people praised the new Mask but no one thought of comparing it with the famous Agaba of Umuagu, if only to say that this one was not as good as that. If Edogo had heard anyone say so he might have been happy. He had not after all set out to excel the greatest carver in Umuaro but he had hoped that someone would link their two names. He began to blame himself for not sitting in the *okwolo*. There, among the elders, was a more likely place to hear the kind of conversation he was listening for. (200)<sup>1</sup>

The revision of a novel, such as Achebe has done in respect of *Arrow of God* is a rare thing. When it is done, however, it reflects the writer's striving to do his best, to improve the quality of his craft. Rather than revise a novel, what novelists often do is to attempt to make subsequent works better, mindful of the comments made by critics of their existing works. *Arrow of God*, it can be argued, is an update of the task Achebe had executed in *Things Fall Apart* and has itself been revised, apparently, to ensure a fuller realization of his vision.

*Things Fall Apart* is no doubt Chinua Achebe's best known work, given the sales figures, the number of critical publications on it and its translations into several foreign languages. Though it is not the first novel published by an African, it is acclaimed to be the text which inaugurated modern African literature. Achebe's subsequent fictions sometimes appear to be assessed, perhaps unconsciously, in terms of how close they have come to matching the success of *Things Fall Apart*. This is a difficult thing to do – just as a father will

have difficulty expressing his preference for one of his children over the others. We can, however, conveniently observe the children's resemblances – to borrow Achebe's metaphor of a writer's oeuvre being like his children – since they come from the same source at the same time that we can comment on 'the peculiar attractiveness of each child.' In an essay titled 'Contrasts, Complementarity and Conscious Craftsmanship in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*,' I had argued that if a novelist cannot rewrite his novel, 'he can at least make amends, explain and expand his views in subsequent works' and went on to show that *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* 'are complementary novels in several respects, apparently because [Achebe had] seen some need to revisit the subjects and themes of the earlier novel.' (5) This reading of the two novels was informed by Robert Wren's view that *Things Fall Apart* is 'one very vital authority which every reader of *Arrow of God* must know to understand the novel well.' (91)

In *Arrow of God* Achebe revisits the subject of the colonial encounter, apparently in response to critics' views on *Things Fall Apart*, to elaborate on dimensions of it that had not been treated sufficiently in the earlier novel. How has he done this? First, he creates a new spatial-historical setting, Umuaro, which is contiguous with Umuofia. With this, he counters in one fell swoop the European view that Africans had no culture or history. Umuaro is a federation of six villages that had been brought together by their common fear of their belligerent neighbour, Abame. The people not only create a state, they also erect a deity, Ulu, their bulwark against Abame attacks. But Ulu is not only the main deity in their pantheon; unlike the Christian deity and in keeping with the Igbo republican social disposition, Ulu is worshipped along with other deities.

Each of the novels has its dominant figure – Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* – and it is with them that the novels open. There is the wrestling match in *Things Fall Apart* which

shows Okonkwo as a man of action and initiates his rise to greatness. He is impulsive, impatient and bigoted. He hardly engages in arguments and imposes his will on others. Being a poor communicator, he will rather have his hands, gun or machete speak for him. His hostile demeanour is evident in his unrelenting opposition to the coming of the Christians. Whereas the narrative opens with the event that brought a relatively unknown Okonkwo to public notice, *Arrow of God* opens with a protagonist who is already the personification of an institution; he is at the height of his power. The social rhythm is controlled by the Priest of Ulu.

In *Arrow of God* Ezeulu is shown to be a contemplative; he is seated in his *obi* watching for the appearance of the new moon. Though he is an old man, Ezeulu is not a weakling; rather he is 'as good as any young man' as he often playfully demonstrates whenever he shakes hands with younger men and deliberately causes them to wince. His office as priest of Ulu calls for cautious scrutiny as a prelude to action. He is conscious of 'the immensity of his power' (3) but knows also about his limitations. Like Okonkwo, he has a 'fiery temper' but, unlike him, always holds it in check. Two incidents illustrate this. He shows restraint when Oduche commits the abomination of imprisoning the sacred python and Ezidemili enquires to know 'what [he is] going to do about the abomination which has been committed in [his] house' (54); he also refuses to react to Mr. Wright's provocative public flogging of his favourite son, Obika.

Ezeulu's actions are usually deliberate. Unlike Okonkwo who threatens to kill his son, Nwoye, for joining the Christians (*Things Fall Apart*, 107), it is Ezeulu who asks his son, Oduche, to join the Christians three years after he had 'promised the white man that he would send one of his sons to church' (45). It has taken him such a long time 'to satisfy himself that the white man had not come for a short visit but to build a house and live' (45). He has realized the inevitability of change, the advantage of seizing the opportunity the

new order promised and the folly inherent in inflexibility. His argument is that '[t]he world is changing .... I do not like it. But I am the like the bird Eneke-nti-oba. When his friends asked him why he was always on the wing he replied: 'Men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching' (45). Though the two novels have clearly contrasting openings, they both end tragically. Okonkwo's suicide implies an admission of failure – the very thing he dreaded most in life; it also emblemizes the decline of the traditional order which he championed. The fact that only strangers – like the Christians – can 'bring [his body] down and bury him' (147) is symptomatic of the corresponding ascendancy of the new order introduced by the European colonizers.

As if to prove that Okonkwo's predilection for violence and his rigid uncompromising stance is not exclusively responsible for the ruin of Umuofia, Achebe creates a different kind of protagonist in *Arrow of God* but plots the story in such a way that the same tragic outcome ensues. In much the same vein, Ezeulu's suicidal stubbornness drives Umuaro to a preventable crisis which undermines his authority and gives the external enemy a stronger presence in the land. By their willful acts – Okonkwo's suicide and Ezeulu's stubbornness – the two protagonists are somewhat like the rascally figure in one of the anecdotes in *Arrow of God* – that of 'the lizard who threw confusion into his mother's funeral rite' (125). It can be surmised from these, therefore, that Achebe does not ascribe sole agency for the eclipse of traditional authority in Umuofia and Umuaro to European intrusion; the indigenous people had by their actions and inactions unwittingly facilitated this. Commenting on the circumstance of Okonkwo's death in *Things Fall Apart*, Megan MacDonald says, 'Suicide is quite literally a 'self-defeating' subversion of tribal ideology' and concludes that '[s]uicide as the action to end all action, frames the text' (176). In

regard to Ezeulu's intransigence, this observation is equally true of *Arrow of God*.

The peculiar flavour of Achebe's use of English has been noted by many scholars and his use of proverbs and anecdotes as structuring devices has been discussed by Bernth Lindfors (2002), Emmanuel Obiechina (1975 & 1993), R.N. Egudu (1981), Adeleke Adeeko (1992) and Remy Oriaku (2007), among others. Achebe had advocated in 'The African Writer and the English Language', that

[t]he African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. I have in mind here the writer who has something new, something different to say. The nondescript writer has little to tell us, anyway, so he might as well tell it in conventional language and get it over with. If I may use an extravagant simile, he is like a man offering a small nondescript sacrifice for which a chick or less will do. A serious writer must look for an animal whose blood can match the power of his offering' (61).

He has therefore consciously striven to infuse Igbo speech mannerisms into the speeches of his characters. This essay was the text of a lecture he gave at the University of Ghana in 1964, the year of the first publication of *Arrow of God*. In another essay, 'Language and the Destiny of Man,' he notes 'the integrity of words' and, borrowing from W.H. Auden, the duty of the poet 'to defend one's language from corruption. And that is particularly serious now. It's being so quickly corrupted. When it is corrupted people lose faith in what they hear, and this leads to violence.' (34-35). He concludes that 'when language is seriously interfered with, when it is disjointed from truth, be it from mere incompetence or worse, from malice, horrors can descend again on mankind' (37). This essay is the text of an address Achebe gave at Dartmouth College, New

Hampshire, USA in 1972, eight years after the first publication of *Arrow of God* and two years before the publication of its revised edition. These two essays point up his conscious emblemization of the vitality of Igbo culture in the language used by his characters.

When Achebe states in another essay, 'The Novelist as Teacher,' his decision to present the African society 'with all its imperfections' in his effort to recuperate African history and humanity which had been impugned by Europeans in the process of justifying slavery and colonization he gives hint of his striving for objectivity. He thus presents African institutions and culture in terms of their vibrancy and the ways in which they reveal the people's conscious responses to their environment. They show how order and social organisation prevail in a world that European detractors had characterized as chaotic and backward.

In *Arrow of God* he has used many more proverbs which are inextricably woven into the fabric of the narrative. Proverbs like '[W]hen two brothers fight to death a stranger inherits their father's estate' (220) and '[N]o man however great was greater than his people, ... no one ever won judgement against the clan' (230) and the anecdote about 'the lizard that ruined his own mother's funeral' (50) – all of which are repeated – are particularly important; they are like the pillars which underpin the plot of the novel. The second proverb stresses the principle of the supremacy of the community and the inevitability of the ruin of the ambitious individual who acts contrary to this code. The first proverb and the anecdote underline the complicity of the Africans themselves in the Europeans' successful penetration of the continent.

The intricate web of relationships and conflicts which characterizes *Arrow of God* has been noted by critics like M.M. Mahood (1979, 183), D. Ibe Nwoga (1981) and C.L. Innes (1990, 71). The conflicts are seen in hostile relationships between people like Ezelu and Nwaka, each of whom has his supporters. There is also the conflict over land ownership between Umuaro and Okperi.

Then, there is the conflict between the indigenous people and the colonials. There is rivalry among the six federating villages of Umuaro. Even within Ezeulu's household there is palpable hostility between his two surviving wives, Ugoye and Matefi. Edogo, Ezeulu's eldest son, resents his father's seeming preference for Obika and Nwafo. Even Ezeulu's mind appears to be plagued by conflict over his loyalty to Ulu and his duty to the community. It is also said 'that the priest of Idemili and Ogwugwu and Eru and Udo had never been happy with their secondary role since the villages got together and made Ulu and put him over the older deities' (40). Umuaro is thus like a volcano that could erupt at any time. Conflict, with the tension which characterizes it, is an inescapable feature of society, something that arises from the competing needs and desires of people in a community and so has to be managed through a system of laws and socio-ethical codes. When the checks are inadequate society experiences convulsions and possibly disintegration.

Umuaro itself is like a child borne out of conflict. The six villages – Umuachala, Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezeani, Umuogwugwu and Umuisiuzo – which had previously 'lived as different peoples, and each worshipped its own deity' had been driven by their common fear of slave raiders from Abame to come together 'to save themselves' (14-15). To effect this, '[t]hey hired a strong team of medicine-men to install a common deity for them. This deity ... was called Ulu.... The six villages then took the name of Umuaro, and the priest of Ulu became their Chief Priest.' (15) Like every other human invention both Umuaro and Ulu are to be taken care of; they will survive only to the extent that the need which led to their creation persists and they are still able to satisfy such need. It is obvious that Ezeulu wields immense power at the same time that his responsibility to the community is equally enormous. Evidence of this is seen in the festival of Pumpkin Leaves in which he, as scapegoat, leads the community in the ritual of cleansing the land

of impurities and abominations. For as long as this ritual is performed Umuaro gets a new lease of life; the consequence of its postponement or being set in abeyance is better imagined.

The opening scene is important not merely because it highlights the commanding role of Ezeulu, but because of the significance of the activity he is engaged in – the sighting of the new moon. Here we are shown Ezeulu peering at the sky, to know if the next new moon has appeared so that he can eat one more of the ritual yams set apart for reckoning time, the seasons and, intertwined with it, the social rhythm. If he should fail in this duty, this rhythm will be upset and some upheaval could set in. This makes him a very powerful person indeed. But power has to be exercised responsibly otherwise, the very disorder which it is meant to prevent will ensue.<sup>2</sup> When power is exercised for the common good, it conduces to the prevalence of public peace, order and wellbeing. If the wielder of power places himself before the commonalty, he is abusing the trust implied in his position. On the other hand, people in power are often envied by the people around them some of whom will try to undermine or subvert their authority; hence there is invariably always latent conflict in society. This is dramatized in *Arrow of God* in Nwaka's adversarial posture towards Ezeulu and the support he gets from Ezidemili. To justify opposition to people in authority, their actions are often deliberately misconstrued, as has happened in the wrangle between Ezeulu and Nwaka. First, there is disagreement between them over the history of Umuaro as a result of which Ezeulu's testimony before the colonial administrator on the land dispute between Umuaro and Okperi is adjudged to amount to a betrayal of his community. He had witnessed to the truth mindful of the office he holds; as he says, 'But how could a man who held the holy staff of Ulu know that a thing was a lie and speak it? How could he fail to tell the story as he had heard it from his own father?' (6-7). Even Nwaka admits that 'a father does not speak falsely to his son' but argues instead that

‘Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own. Knowledge of the land is also like that. Ezeulu has told us what his father told him about the olden days.... But we also know that the lore of the land is beyond the knowledge of many fathers.... Elders and Ndichie of Umuaro let everyone return to his house if we have no heart in the fight. We shall not be the first people who abandoned their farmland or even their homestead to avoid war. But let us not tell ourselves or our children that we did it because the land belonged to other people. Let us rather tell them that their fathers did not choose to fight. Let us tell them also that we marry the daughters of Okperi and their men marry our daughters, and that where there is this mingling men often lose the heart to fight.’ (16).

He thus mischievously clinches the argument when he insinuates bias on the part of Ezeulu whose ‘mother had been a daughter of Okperi,’ hence some in the assembly have been swayed into saying that maybe ‘Ezeulu had forgotten whether it was his father or his mother who told him about the farmland’ (17). Not only does Nwaka carry the day with his demagoguery, he emboldens hawks – like Akukalia – into a more belligerent attitude. It can be argued that the ensuing skirmishes between Umuaro and Okperi were made inevitable by the conflict in Umuaro itself.

This contrasts sharply with a similar situation in *Things Fall Apart* where, in spite of his inclination to acting precipitately, Okonkwo, Umuofia’s emissary to Mbaino, had conducted himself with dignity and kept to his mandate and so his mission ended with Mbaino making peace with Umuofia. In *Arrow of God*, however, the sentiments of the anti-Ezeulu faction has fuelled Akukalia’s bellicosity, hence his mission rather than prevent war actually became its immediate cause. Akukalia and his companions had been hostile to their Okperi hosts to the point of provocation; they had rebuffed the customary welcome gestures offered them by their Okperi contacts – Uduezue, Otikpo and Ebo. Akukalia’s hostile

bearing triggered Ebo's remark about his impotence and when he splits the latter's *ikenga*, 'the strength of his right arm,' he has to pay the supreme price. Even his kinsmen admit 'that their clansman had done an unforgivable thing.... he made [Ebo] a corpse before his own eyes' and no 'propitiation or sacrifice would atone for such sacrilege' (25). He had acted just as Ezeulu thought he would: 'a boy sent by his father to steal does not go stealthily but breaks the door with his feet.... We want war. How Akukalia speaks to his mother's people is a small thing. He can spit into their faces if he likes' (18). Having sent Akukalia to his violent death, the hawkish faction in Umuaro embarks on a war to avenge him. Egged on by Nwaka whose sole motive is to undercut the Chief Priest of Ulu, they launch an attack on Okperi, once again disregarding Ezeulu's advice: 'If you go to war to avenge a man who passed shit on the head of his mother's father, Ulu will not follow you to be soiled in the corruption.' (27) The intervention of agents of the colonial administration led by Captain Winterbottom brought the four-day war to an end.

Umuaro may have inflicted heavier casualties on Okperi thus avenging their unfortunate emissary, but they are the ultimate losers. The disputed land is awarded to Okperi by the colonial administration and, worse still, Winterbottom confiscates and destroys their guns. This is a symbolic emasculation of the clan, a permanent end to their capacity for challenging British interest in the area. Though the Umuaroans blame the fiasco on Ekwensu, the fall guy in Igbo popular lore,<sup>3</sup> it is their internal wrangling that has brought this about. The war has been fought between two Igbo communities, Umuaro and Okperi, both of which lost in the end. Okperi lost three more men in the fighting but Umuaro alone had been disarmed by the British agent based at Okperi. Okperi was already under effective occupation; by attacking the base of the colonial mission, Umuaro had inadvertently attracted the wrath of the British and so had to be subdued. Prior to this conflict, the two

Igbo communities had been inextricably bound to each other by commerce and intermarriages; Ezeulu and Akukalia are among Umuaroans whose mothers had come from Okperi. By engaging in needless conflict they have given the stranger in their midst the pretext for his self-serving intervention.

This bears out the saying that 'when two brothers fight a stranger reaps the harvest' (131). In my view this is central to Achebe's thematic preoccupation in this novel. He has contrived for Ezeulu to elaborate on this in the first context where this proverb is used:

'Don't make me laugh....So I betrayed Umuaro to the white man? Let me ask you one question. Who brought the white man here? Was it Ezeulu? We went to war against Okperi who are our blood brothers over a piece of land which did not belong to us and you blame the white man for stepping in. Have you not heard that when two brothers fight a stranger reaps the harvest? How many white men went in the party that destroyed Abame? Do you know? Five.... Five. Now have you ever heard that five people – even if their heads reached the sky – could overrun a whole clan? Impossible. With all their power and magic white men would not have overrun entire Olu and Igbo if we did not help them. Who showed them the way to Abame? They were not born there; how did they find the way? We showed them and are still showing them. So let nobody come to me and complain that the white man did this and did that. The man who brings ant-infested faggots into his hut should not grumble when lizards begin to pay him a visit.

...We did many things wrong in the past, but we should not therefore go on doing the same today. We now know what we did wrong, so we can put it right again. We know where the rain began to fall on us...' (131-132).

The authorial intrusion is rather obvious here. Achebe had largely disposed of the theme of European incursion into Africa in *Things*

*Fall Apart*; here in *Arrow of God* he is concerned with the vestiges of that event, specifically with the continued collaboration with foreign interests under colonialism and, by extension, in the post-colonial era.

It is ironic that Ezeulu should be blaming other people for aiding the white man's intrusion into Umuaro at the same time that he is being referred to as the white man's friend, his collaborator. To his detractors, his witnessing against Umuaro, to the applause of the white man and his sending of his son, Oduche, to the Christian mission are proof of this. Ezeulu seems to address this issue when he says further,

'We have shown the white man the way to our house and given him a stool to sit on. If we now want him to go away we must either wait until he is tired of his visit or we must drive him away. Do you think you can drive him away by blaming Ezeulu?... I have my own way and I shall follow it. I can see things where other men are blind. That is why I am Known and at the same time I am Unknowable. You are my friend.... But you cannot know the Thing which beats the drum to which Ezeulu dances. I can see tomorrow; that is why I can tell Umuaro: *come out from this because there is death there or do this because there is profit in it*. If they listen to me, o-o; if they refuse to listen, o-o. I have passed the stage of dancing to receive presents.' (132' emphasis original)

This echoes Ezeulu's justification of his decision to send Oduche to join the Christians.

In his polemical writings Achebe endorses the vision implied in Ezeulu's flexibility and willingness to meet the new European culture halfway. His saying – 'The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had we known tomorrow' – is like a rephrase of Achebe's recommendation of 'the necessary backward step which a judicious

viewer may take in order to see a canvass steadily and fully' in 'Named for Victoria, Queen of England' (68). Achebe identifies education as a major benefit accruing from the colonial encounter. In *The Education of a British-Protected Child* he recalls how his great-uncle, Udoh Osinyi, had, while remaining a traditionalist, allowed Achebe's father to join the Christians:

Those two – my father and his uncle [who raised him when he was orphaned] – formulated the dialectic which I inherited. Udoh stood fast in what he knew, but he left room also for his nephew to seek other answers. The answer my father found in the Christian faith solved many problems, but by no means all.

His great gifts to me were his appreciation for education, and his recognition that whether we look at one human family or we look at human society in general, growth can come only incrementally, and every generation must recognize and embrace the task it is peculiarly designed by history and by providence to perform (37).

This recall of this real life experience would suggest Achebe's endorsement of the Priest of Ulu's sending of Oduche to the Christian mission.<sup>4</sup> For all his pragmatism, however, Ezeulu is a flawed character. His flaw derives from his self-isolation, his distancing of self from the same community from which he derived his significance.

While he is willing to accommodate the white man's venture, he remains rigid in his relationship with his kinsmen. His principled testimony in favour of Okperi earned him the white man's recognition as a witness of truth but thereafter it brought him reproach and animosity among his kinsmen. To them, he is like the proverbial irresponsible 'lizard that ruined his own mother's funeral' and should not expect 'outsiders to carry the burden of honouring his dead' (50, 125, 230). Thus, he is doomed. He has not heeded the wisdom in the proverb 'no man however great can win judgement against a clan' (131) which is elaborated in the

penultimate paragraph of the novel, 'no man however great was greater than his people... no one ever won judgement against his clan' (230). His sense of the grandeur of his office leads to suspicion that he has pretension to kingship on account of which his detractors try to preemptively destroy him. Citing the anecdote of the fowl which stayed away from a meeting of his community and got sacrificed by them, Achebe comments in *Home and Exile*,

In the worldview of the Igbo the individual is unique; the town is unique. How do they bring the competing claims of these two into some kind of resolution? Their answer is a popular assembly that is small enough for everybody who wishes to be present to do so and to 'speak his own mouth,' as they like to phrase it.

A people who would make and treasure that fable of the negligent chicken and the assembly of his fellows must be serious democrats. In all probability they would not wish to live under the rule of kings. The Igbo did not wish to, and made no secret of their disinclination (*Home and Exile*, 15-16).

Ezeulu's detention reflects colonial injustice, his offence being that he refused what he considered to be the white man's Greek gift to him. But rather than vent his anger on the British for this, he vows instead to do battle with his own people: 'I want to wrestle with my own people whose hand I know and who know my hand. I am going home to challenge all those who have been poking their fingers into my face to come outside their gate and meet me in combat and whoever throws the other will strip him of his anklet' (179). John Nwodika to whom these words are addressed likens this to '[t]he challenge of Eneke Ntulukpa to man, bird and beast' – a challenge to 'the whole world' but the anecdote fails to alert Ezeulu to the foolhardiness of what he proposes to do. In his blind loyalty to Ulu he seems to have forgotten that Ulu is the creation of Umuaro and by standing against the clan he is being 'like the little bird, nza, who ate and drank and challenged his personal god to single combat.'

(14) In his haughty demeanour he is going to reenact the fate of the figure in the anecdote of the champion wrestler who went to wrestle in the land of spirits and against all entreaties for him to come away after beating all comers 'gave a challenge to the spirits to bring out their best and strongest wrestler. So they sent him his personal god, a little wiry spirit who seized him with one hand and smashed him on the stony earth' (26-27).

Ezeulu's refusal to eat the sacred yams out of season and announce the Feast of the New Yam is his way of 'wrestling' with the people 'who have been poking their fingers into [his] face.' The effect of this is that the harvest is delayed, the social cycle is disrupted and hunger ravages the land. The ensuing suffering affects all and sundry to the extent that people are constrained to cope through extraordinary strategies. The Christian mission is quick to exploit the situation when it invites starving Umuaroans to 'bring their one yam [offering] to church instead of giving it to Ulu' with the promise that 'the god of the Christians' would protect them 'from the anger of Ulu.' (216). Not a few people take up this offer. The fissure caused by the conflict in the community is widening into an unbridgeable gulf which the colonisers will exploit. It is not surprising that there are people in Umuaro who are ready to defy Ulu, mindful that their ancestors erected Ulu and placed him over them as their 'saver' (207); he will remain relevant only for as long as he performs that function effectively. If he were to prove unresponsive to their needs, they will discard him. In fact they know the anecdote about 'how the people of Aninta dealt with their deity when he failed them' – they '[carried] him to the boundary between them and their neighbours and set fire on him' (28).

This eclipse of Ulu coincides with Ezeulu's domestic woes: the unspoken ostracism of his family by starving and angry Umuaroans, the death of Obika, and Ezeulu's slide into dementia. There are thus two dimensions to the tragedy that has unfolded. First, Ezeulu has

lost out in the power play. By refusing, as he put it, 'to eat death' (207), he abdicates his responsibility as Umuaro's scapegoat and forfeits the vital support the community gives him. He unwittingly undermines his authority when he acts in a way that subverts Umuaro's original narrative which he renders during the reenactment of 'the First Coming of Ulu' at the annual Feast of Pumpkin Leaves (70-71). He derives his power from the people and when he alienates them this power will desert him, like the man in the anecdote who realized in the heat of battle that his protective charm had suddenly lost its efficacy (228). It is his realization of his predicament that unhinged his mind. It can be argued that Ezeulu had misinterpreted the will of Ulu or his quest for vengeance had clouded his vision and made him deliberately misrepresent the deity. In that case, his fate is deserved. If, however, he 'was no more than an arrow in the bow of his god,' (192) a faithful servant of Ulu, then the deity has, as the narrator says, 'chosen a dangerous time' to abandon or sacrifice him 'for in destroying his priest he had also brought disaster on himself, like the lizard in the fable who ruined his mother's funeral by his own hand' (230). Both deity and priest are thus ruined as the old order gives way in Umuaro. In the new Umuaro that emerges, Ulu has been supplanted by the alien Christian deity. As the title of the other novel in Achebe's trilogy would suggest, this is an Umuaro that is 'no longer at ease.'

Umuaro is a state which at its foundation held great promise. It flounders when its principal strategic institution cannot rise to the occasion of internal conflict and finally buckles under the weight of external pressure. In creating Umuaro's story, Achebe is mindful of his self-image: that of the writer as a patriot. In *Things Fall Apart* he has adequately taken care of the fundamental theme [which] must first be disposed of – the restoration of the dignity, culture and humanity of the African which the Europeans had impugned to justify their colonization of the continent. He revisits the question of the 'image of Africa' in *Arrow of God*. But in writing this novel, he

invents a 'reusable past' by deploying in the novel themes which are relevant to the present and the future. The mystique of the writer as a prophet is evident in Achebe's writing. There is the well known case of the occurrence of the first military coup d'état soon after the publication of *A Man of the People*, a novel in which a corrupt and inept government is overthrown by soldiers. What is often overlooked is that *Arrow of God* with its sustained focus on internal conflict and an uncaring leadership imagistically predicts future trends in Nigeria. This can be surmised from a cursory look at *The Trouble with Nigeria* and *There Was a Country*, two nonfiction texts which reveal Achebe's abiding concern with Nigeria's embarrassing failure to live up to her potentials. Achebe's engagement with Nigeria is premised on his belief that

Nigeria is a nation favoured by Providence. I believe there are individuals as well as nations who, on account of peculiar gifts and circumstances, are commandeered by history to facilitate mankind's advancement. Nigeria is such a nation. The vast human and material wealth with which she is endowed bestows on her a role in Africa and the world which no one else can assume or fulfill. The fear that should nightly haunt our leaders (but does not) is that they may already have betrayed irretrievably Nigeria's high destiny' (24).<sup>5</sup>

First published in 1983, *The Trouble with Nigeria* expresses the commonly felt frustration at Nigeria's failure to rise to her citizens' reasonable expectations; the little book is Achebe's prognosis of the country's bleak future, given the myriad of problems that have beset her.

The chapters on 'Tribalism,' 'Patriotism' and 'The Igbo Problem' relate to the lack of unity and cohesion in the country's political structure, hence other problems which he discusses in three other chapters – 'Social Injustice and the Cult of Mediocrity,' 'Indiscipline' and 'Corruption' – proliferate. Though the issue of inter-ethnic conflict looms large in his analysis of Nigeria's problems, Achebe

reasons that these several problems arise and persist because of a more fundamental problem: bad leadership. Thus he argues in the opening paragraph of the first chapter, 'Where the Problem Lies':

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership (22).

He goes on to say that the leaders there have been were people bereft of thought for the common good. Citing examples from declarations by Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo in their autobiographies, he observes that '[t]houghts such as these are more likely to produce aggressive millionaires than selfless leaders of their people' (32). A common inclination arising from this is that Nigerian leaders promote narrow ethnic interests in their bid to checkmate their rivals from other ethnic groups at the same time that they pay lip service to nationalism. He says, 'Nothing in Nigeria's political history captures her problem of national integration more graphically than the chequered fortune of the word *tribe* in her vocabulary. *Tribe* has been accepted at one time as a friend, rejected as an enemy at another, and finally smuggled in through the back-door as an accomplice' (25). His conclusion is that what is needed in Nigeria is a corps of leaders who privilege the common good over their self-aggrandizement, hence he recommends in the last chapter of the book what he calls 'the example of Aminu Kano – a selfless commitment to the common people of our land whom we daily deprive and dispossess and whose plight we treat so callously and frivolously' (86). Achebe's condemnation of ethnic jingoists who 'instigated divisions' to facilitate their accession to public office and his call for selfless leadership recall characters and situations in *Arrow of God*. His goal

is to rouse Nigerians to prevent the failure of Nigeria in the manner of the capitulation of Umuaro to the lure of British/Christian protection.

The cataclysm Achebe foresaw came in the form of the crisis of 1966 that culminated in the Nigeria-Biafra War which raged from July 1967 to January 1970 and is the subject of his last book, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. Appropriating the advantage of an eyewitness account, he recounts how in the absence of a responsible and selfless leadership Nigerians' uncontrolled rivalries for power and lingering ethnic animosities snowballed into a pogrom and a genocidal civil war. He authenticates his experiences by revealing his direct participation in many events in the crisis and war. He was targeted for elimination during the massacre of Igbo people outside the Eastern Region, supported the self-determination project of Biafra, suffered privation, had close shaves with death, lost friends (like Christopher Okigbo) and witnessed the continuation of social injustices and discriminatory policies in post-Civil War Nigeria. His vast knowledge of the events of the period is made more plausible by his work in the broadcast media – as a news gatherer and disseminator.

*The Trouble with Nigeria* and *There Was a Country* are books Achebe has written with the benefit of hindsight, distillations of ideas gained in the course of the violent drift that ensued after the attainment of flag independence. The slide towards anarchy had been fictionally hinted at in *Anthills of the Savannah* which was first published in the era of military dictatorship that exacerbated the old problems of the country. It is likely that Achebe has been prompted by an increasing sense of urgency of the need to arrest the drift towards anarchy to resort to the genre of nonfiction – essays (*Hopes and Impediments* and *Home and Exile*) and memoirs (*There Was a Country* and *The Education of a British-Protected Child*) to galvanize Nigeria into action.

The value of such writing has been stated by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, himself a novelist, memoirist and essayist, in the 'Author's Note' in his *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*. Noting that 'the collection of essays is an integral part of the fictional world' of his novels, he says,

In the essay the writer can be more direct, didactic, polemical, or he can merely state his beliefs and faith: his conscious self is here more at work. Nevertheless the boundaries of his imagination are limited by the writer's beliefs, interests, and experiences in life, by where in fact he stands in the world of social relations. This must be part of the reason that readers are curious about a writer's opinion on almost everything under the sun.... The writer is thus forced either by the public or by the needs of his craft to define his beliefs, attitudes and outlook in the more argumentative form of the essay (xv).

In his 'Foreword' to the book, the Nigerian critic Ime Ikiddeh says 'the essays are dialectical in approach, and yet their messages remain at all times unambiguous and direct. They ... differ from the novels in dimension, in tone, and in the clarity of commitment' (xii). This is no less true of Achebe. A creative writer does not usually interpret his fictions but he can give his readers a privileged peep into the consciousness that has wrought them through his essays and memoirs which help to elucidate what has been masked in the work of fiction. Achebe's nonfiction texts, especially *The Trouble with Nigeria* and *There Was a Country*, thus put the ideas in *Arrow of God* in sharp relief.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All page references are to the 1975 reprint of the Second Edition of *Arrow of God*.

<sup>2</sup> See the second chapter of Christopher S. Nwodo's *Philosophical Perspective on Chinua Achebe* (pp. 26-53).

<sup>3</sup> See Damian U. Opata's book, *Ekwensu in the Igbo Imagination: A Heroic Deity or Christian Devil?*

<sup>4</sup> Achebe has argued for a culture of mutual accommodation by different cultures and interests. (*There Was a Country*, p.13; *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, pp.36-37; *Home and Exile*, pp.8-11; *Hopes and Impediments*, pp.21-23). Here he tells anecdotes of the coexistence side-by-side of Christians and traditionalists in his extended family, in a way that suggests his endorsement of Ezeulu's decision to send Oduche to the Christian establishment (*Arrow of God*, 45-46).

<sup>5</sup> References here are to the twin-publication, *An Image of Africa and The Trouble with Nigeria* in the Penguin Books – Great Ideas Series (London: Penguin, 2010).

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