



Rules of Doom: Analysing the Policy of Indirect Rule as observed in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*

First Author: Jereena Babu (Research Scholar)

Second Author: Dr Shiva Chaudhary (Assistant Professor, Department of English)

Area: Postcolonial Studies

Jain (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Colonial Nigeria had been subjected to colonisation since the early 80s which went on till the 1960's when Nigeria finally gained Independence. The excruciating experiences with their colonisers carved in them the realisation to obtain emancipation from their fangs. Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* highlight's the struggle of a leader-priest who tries to dismiss colonial rule and in the process loses the support and respect of his tribe. The British colonists wanted to educate the leader about their dealings and therefore invite him to join them in their leadership. The stark difference in their ruling method was that Ezeulu would not be directly in charge, rather would convey the decisions from the coloniser to his people. The policy of indirect rule as it is known suppresses the authoritarian power of the actual leader, reducing his role to a puppet leader under the actual leadership. Retaliating against this injustice was considered a crime and so Ezeulu ended up in prison for a while. With the help of the black men, indirect rule is a cover-up for the white men who have ulterior motives with the new land they landed in. The indirect method of ruling brought in by the coloniser and the experiences of the Nigerian people with the change in the ruling system brought in by the coloniser will be addressed in the course of this paper.

Keywords: postcolonial Nigeria, indirect rule, puppet leader, injustice, emancipation

It is often regarded as a preconception that if a country and its people follow their own set of traditions and system of rule, to the outsiders it looks like they are uncivilised. The colonisers then deem it necessary for changes to be made in those areas and most often those changes are not pleasing. When Nigeria was colonised by the British in 1884, they could not hold out against the strong military army that the Brits brought with them. Initially, the British colonists wanted to loot the resources that Nigeria produced and make the most of it. But in their extended visit, they found problems with the traditional rules and customs that the Nigerians followed and sought out to straighten them out. Pagan idol worship, gods of different sectors such as the god of harvest, believing in oracles and so on were considered uncivilised and therefore needed a proper system to bring the people back to their senses. To build a system, the colonists had two options of ruling, direct and indirect rule. Direct rule encompassed military power to accomplish the task through violence, hard and fast rules while under indirect rule, some Nigerian people would be anointed as chiefs and were expected to communicate the changes proposed by the colonists to their tribe. Indirect rule would prove to be more fruitful as one of their own people was communicating with them. With language being a barrier for the colonists, this method would yield much better results.

As the central theme of the novel, the efforts of the priest of the god Ulu, Ezeulu, to cope with both the adherents of a rival god, Idemili, who hold political power, and the British District Officer Captain Winterbottom, whose aim is to make Ezeulu his enforcer, are the defining concerns. Despite realising that he would have great power over his enemies, Ezeulu turns down the chieftaincy, being imprisoned far from home for his refusal. During this time, Ezeulu develops a plan to punish his opponents. In the two-moon period that the village of Umuaro is incarcerated, he does not consume two sacred yams, so the yam harvest in the name of his God, Ulu, cannot proceed.

Ezeulu's concern over his refusal to name the feast of the yam and its importance can be observed from the excerpt below:

Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the 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...No! the Chief Priest of Ulu was more than that, must be more than that. 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 had ever refused. So it could not be done. He would not dare (Achebe 1)

The village of Umuaro thus faces famine. When faced with famine, believers in Christ offer absolution to those who avoid eating ripe yams from the fields for fear of provoking Ulu's wrath. They ask the people of Umuaro to give thanks and offerings thanks to Christ during the harvest festival, abandoning Ulu and Ezeulu. Unlike the other book in the trilogy *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* features a great variety of narrative voices. It has been called 'the richest, most mysterious of Achebe's novels. In *Things Fall Apart*, the perspective is unified, whereas, in *Arrow of God*, we encounter multiple rivalries, alternate points of view, and interpretations. We encounter a varied attitude towards rules among the British administration. Umuchu's inhabitants experience conflicts between generations and between Christians and traditional believers. The events of the novel are discussed from several viewpoints, with differing interpretations of the God's status and the founding of Umuchu, the Opkeri's claims to farmland despite contesting opinions about their ownership rights and Ezeulu's motives at various stages.

According to Innes several reasons were identified for the different perspectives presented in the novel:

first . . . it provides a . . . convincing and complex portrayal of a traditional community and the tensions and rivalries which make it active and vital; secondly, this varied community becomes both the background and the most stringent test for traditional Igbo forms of policymaking and leadership, for the balancing and reconciling of rival claims, and for raising issues concerning individual and communal authority; thirdly, these opposing perspectives are concerned with what seems to be the central theme of the novel, the problem

of 'knowing' . . . Arrow of God is 'about' the problem of authority and the related questions of whom and what to follow . . . (72)

Achebe presents multiple interpretations which are offered by diverse narrative voices. What is especially insightful is his interrogation of the sources and limitations of the authority exercised by Ezeulu.

In, the early stages of reading into the novel, the reader can find Ezeulu contemplating the forces which limit, contest and circumscribe his power:

Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real. It was true he named the day for the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and the New Yam feast; but he did not choose it. He was merely a watchman . . . What kind of power was it if it would never be used? (Achebe 3)

A contrast is drawn between Ezeulu's awareness of the uncertainty of his power and the British administration's approach towards him as they require him to exercise the authority of a warrant chief. For the British to create an administrative chief from a man who is familiar with the limitations of his abilities in his spiritual role, they must create a 'creative misunderstanding' and this is what Achebe has tried to explore in this novel.

The most common question that we encounter concerning colonisation is when does a country seem “weak” or “powerless” enough to be dominated by another country? Numerous practices of the people, for instance, the poor administrative positions, lack of tax systems or proper division of finance, lack of enforcement of law, labour, education and infrastructure contribute to the perspective of looking like a “debilitated” community. The continent of Africa had its own perceptions of how its people had to live and abide by the rules created by a very parochial set of rulers. Some parts of Africa, specifically Eastern Nigeria suffered more rigorous consequences than the rest because of failure to adopt a more conscious and practical system of ruling. Nigeria,

however, post colonisation saw a few positive changes despite the resistance from the people. Slavery was abolished and a new British system ensured order in place of chaos and civilised behaviour in place of uncultured “savage” behaviour. Sir Fredrick Lugard, the proprietor of the indirect rule movement, made a considerably better choice at choosing indirect rule instead of employing violent means to establish new changes in the Nigerian system and to get the people to cooperate with the changes. The warrant chief system was introduced because the British believed that there were chiefs in the country and that they could rule indirectly. Critics of this system argue that the chiefs were not representative of the people's traditional authority. Herbert Palmer, a trusted officer of Lugard, claimed that warrant chiefs were more likely to be successful traders than the general population. Ralph Moor was of the opinion that ruling through the chiefs was the best way to teach the lower sections of society the lessons of civilization. Sir Ralph Moor and Sir Claude Macdonald were two British administrators who introduced the warrant chief system in Eastern Nigeria. They were convinced that they were being ruled indirectly by the chiefs and kings of the coastal regions namely the Obong of Calabar, the Amayanabo of Kalahari and the Mingi of Brass and therefore had become familiar with the rules and traditions that these kings had established there. They believed that the Ibibio and Ibo peoples had similar "chieftaincies" and "kingships", which encouraged them to seek to rule them through their own chiefs. If it is a personnel issue, then it would be difficult to speak of a warrant chief without referring to a more significant structure of authority, such as the ama-ala or the village council of elders since such was the tradition under the Ibo system. The issue however was not with the personnel as it had more to do with the warrant chief system and did not incorporate the opinions of the ama-ala. Since Indirect Rule had to follow the traditional rule of the people and that was not followed by the introduction of the warrant chief system, it took time for the colonial administrative changes to settle in.

The Northern Nigerian Protectorate, under a British official known as the "Resident", was primarily divided into six provinces. These provinces were further segregated into districts headed by an official called a district commissioner. This system was fairly successful in the north unlike in the east of Nigeria, where it didn't prove fruitful as mentioned earlier. This was mainly because their decentralised pre-colonial political government and the introduction of warrant chiefs were not welcomed by the Easterners. The deputies were callous and arbitrary in performing their official duties. In Eastern Nigeria, the introduction of the tax system raised

speculations that it was being abused by subpoena leaders since there were concerns that women were paying taxes. But this was later stabilised in the Aba Women's Riots in 1929. Since the west of Nigeria established the system of checks and balances in their administration, the indirect rule system was moderately successful. Then the problem arose when the educated elite in Nigeria began to resist indirect rule. They argued that the British government deliberately employed uneducated traditional rulers who were unable to question or oppose any decisions made by British officials while the educated elites were not recognized and therefore could not participate in the operation. As a result, a sense of nationalism rose among the Nigerian people and the country's spirit towards the need for liberation fueled. Herbert Macaulay, who was known as the father of nationalism, later led campaigns against the British colonial government for independence for the country, which successfully culminated in the granting of independence on October 1, 1960. As to answer the question of what facilitated the introduction of indirect rule in Nigeria, it was because the British colonial government adopted this system due to a shortage of British personnel and insufficient funding. Since the same system had been introduced by the British in a few other countries like India, the results could be guaranteed hence triggering their motive to adopt the same in Nigeria.

Indirect rule in general was not an acceptable system for most countries that were colonised. Since most countries have a system of their own, the integration of new and foreign rule disrupts the normalcy that its people have seen and are familiar with. While some countries retaliate against the sudden change in colonial administration, others silently suffer the changes with little to no choice. In the case of countries like Nigeria, India and some others, the choice to strike back is not a feasible option due to either a lack of a military unit or any group that helps them fight back against colonisation or because of the lack of strong leadership and communication skills. The predicament of the people from such countries is beyond unfortunate and it is only post their struggle for liberation that they attain peace. Chinua Achebe speaks for most of Africa in his books where the injustice committed against the African people are voiced. As readers, our concern is not to understand whether Africa underwent positive or negative changes; rather it is to comprehend the path and the course of action that led to those changes. Chinua Achebe's word, "The sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them" can be interpreted this way, the world is quick to recognize civilised changes but those changes also came as a result of the people's submission to a dominating force. The quandary of the

Nigerian people will be etched in the minds of every reader who takes up a reading on Africa because the voice and the image of Africa are realistically portrayed in all of Achebe's works.

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