

Arrow of God, respect and reputation are highly valued in both Igbo and British cultures– A Study

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Abstract

This paper looks at *Arrow of God*, published in 1964, is the third novel by Chinua Achebe and it's Culture and Language in Literature influences. *Arrow of God* won the first ever Jock Campbell/New Statesman Prize for African writing. This novel is centered around a chief priest, Ezeulu. He is the spokesman of a local deity of 6 villages which came together for the sake of survival against its more formidable neighbours. Though he is the voice of the god, the leaders of this village chose to reject Ezeulu's advice to fight with a neighbouring village over a piece of land, and suffered the humiliation of the white man, the British monarch's representative in colonial Africa, ruling against them. The "arrow of God" is a reference to the role Ezeulu plays in this novel. As Chief Priest of the deity Ulu, Ezeulu is in the enviable or unenviable position of being Ulu's messenger, his "arrow." As Ulu's messenger, Ezeulu is an important part of Umuaro's cultural and religious life, but he is offered little respect and much criticism. (In an interesting plot parallel, Ezeulu doesn't respect the messengers of the white man either.) In the role as God's arrow, Ezeulu is able to punish the village of Umuaro by withholding the announcement of the Feast of the New Yam; without that announcement, the people cannot harvest their new crops, leading to widespread famine. Ezeulu promptly refuses to be a 'white man's chief' and is thrown into prison to the astonishment of every hearer. *Arrow of God* is notable for a wealth of minor characters, including Ezeulu's wives, sons, and daughters and his rivals and friends, and for its ethnographic richness, describing the ordinary life, religious rituals, and social stresses of an Ibo village; it is the story of a community as well as of an individual. Achebe inserts us into this world naturally and without any direct explanation, however, to the extent that it is the British characters who seem strange and out of place. Nor is there an idealisation of traditional life, or any simplistic anti-colonialism.

Key words: Arrow of God, Ezeulu, anti-colonialism, idealization, Achebe, Culture , Language

Introduction

The opinion of Ezeulu was sought in coming to this judgment which endeared him to the white man who upon being pressured by Britain to include locals in the colonial administration calls on Ezeulu to become 'King' in his own land. This novel is called "Arrow of God" because Ezeulu compares himself to an arrow in their god's bow. "Arrow of God" is drawn from an Igbo proverb in which a person, or sometimes an event, is said to represent the will of God. Ezeulu claims that the hardships he has brought to the village are Ulu's will, for which God he is the chief priest whose most potent magic is achieved through a sacred python. Though he distrusts Christianity, he allows a colonial district officer to send one of his sons to a mission school. To the chief's horror, the Christianized boy zealously imprisons the sacred python in a box. "An abomination has happened," cries one tribesman. "Today I shall kill the boy with my own hands," says the chief. As chief priest, Ezeulu is responsible for safeguarding the traditions and

rituals of the people. For example, Ezeulu watches each month for the new moon. He eats a sacred yam and beats the ogene to mark the beginning of each new month. Only the chief priest can name the day for the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves or for the New Yam Feast, which ushers in the yam harvest. Ezeulu considers himself “merely a watchman” for Ulu. The novel begins with a flashback in which Nwaka, a prosperous man and a supporter of Ezidemili, the chief priest of the god, Idemili conflicts between the Ezeulu over a land dispute between Umuaro and the nearby village of Okperi. Nwaka leads a group of villagers who want to go to war against Okperi. Ezeulu opposes them. All six villages of Umuaro side with Nwaka and override Ezeulu. Akukalia, an emissary from Umuaro, is sent to Okperi to announce the war. Feeling as if he was not properly received, Akukalia, in a fit of anger, breaks one of the villager’s personal gods which prompts the people of Okperi to kill the Akukalia which sparks a war. The war is stopped by Captain T.K. Winterbottom, the District Officer, breaks all the guns in Okperi and Umuaro. Ezeulu impresses Captain Winterbottom by testifying trustfully that his people do not have a right to the land in question.

Nwaka draws attention to Ezeulu’s friendship with the white men who are taking the Igbo land thus Ezeulu recognizing the anger, delays his departure for Okperi and angers Winterbottom. When Ezeulu arrives on Government Hill he is imprisoned. Winterbottom has become ill so Assistant District Officer Tony Clarke makes the offer to Ezeulu that the British would like to make him a ruler. Ezeulu declines to be “a white man’s chief”. Ezeulu angers the British administration, which detains him so that he cannot begin the yam harvest. The people become divided between their loyalty to Ulu and their loyalty to the survival of the community. While the people argue and starve, Ezeulu’s son Obika dies suddenly while performing as Ogbazulobodo, the night spirit, in a ritual for a funeral. The people take Obika’s death as a sign that Ulu had either chastised or abandoned his priest and “that no man however great was greater than his people; that no one ever won judgment against his clan”. Because Ulu failed them, the people of Umuaro turn to Christianity, harvesting the yams and taking a sacrificial offering to a Christian leader instead. Achebe’s achievement is to portray his obvious love and respect for the Igbo people balanced with an honest representation of their lives, conflicts, and culture.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore *Arrow of God* as a classical tragedy: With protagonist Ezeulu is unlucky in facing challenges his fall is also the result of his pride. Also cultural and language narrative subtext in the novel

Interrogatives as Comments In Arrow of God

Some characters utilize questions in monologues as well as in conversations to remark on their personal ideas and perception of issues. In the example below, Ezeulu in a monologue uses questions to reflect his feelings of disgust over Obika’s recklessness especially in relation to drinking, considering the fact that he is about to marry: ...When she arrives what a husband she would find. A man who could not watch his hut at night because he was dead with palmwine? Where did the manhood of such a husband lie? A man who could not protect his wife if night marauders knocked at his door? A man who was roused in the morning by the Tufia! Spat the old priest. He could not contain

his disgust (79). Also in this conversation between Ezeulu's eldest wife, Matefi's and her daughter on the subject of the new moon, Matefi first uses a question before using a declarative to register her comment about the new moon. But, how is it sitting? I don't like its posture (2) The interrogative expression has no pair part and the speaker does not allow the listener to take her turn to provide an answer before she introduces her opinion of the moon. In this instance, one can clearly see a shift in the use of interrogatives but the meaning can be deduced from the context where speakers understand that interrogatives can be employed directly to make comments.

Strategy for Instigating

Revolt In Arrow of God questioning serves as a persuasive strategy for instigating revolt, especially against the traditional authority – the deity, Ulu, as well as his chief priest. This form appears to be a major linguistic device employed to fuel the internal conflict in Umuaro. In the secret meeting which Nwaka holds with some selected members of the community, he drives his agitation over Ezeulu's authority with series of rhetorical questions: My father told me many things but he did not tell me that Ezeulu was king in Umuaro. Who is he anyway? Does anybody here enter his compound through the man's gate? If Umuaro decided to have a king, we know where it would come from. Since when did Umuachala become head of the six villages? And we have all heard how people of Aninta dealt with their deity when he failed them. Did they not carry him out to the boundary between and their neighbours and set him on fire? The sequence of interrogatives interspersed with declarative structures also marks a speech pattern that is used to characterize Igbo traditional orators, as typified in Nwaka, who in this novel is portrayed as a major antagonist of Ulu and his chief priest.

Condolence Message and Interrogatives

In Arrow of God to express condolence. Still in the same scene, the people who came to condole with Ugoye, Oduche's mother used questions: Eeu! What shall we do to children of today? Ezeulu strode into the compound and ordered them to leave...What harm have we done in coming to console another woman? (52) The reaction of Ezeulu and the retort of the sympathisers indicate that the interlocutors understand the communicative import of the structure. Also Ezeulu's friend, Akuebue, uses question to condole with him over the flogging of Obika by the Whiteman. Did they say Obika was whipped by the white man? Ezeulu opened both palms to the sky and said nothing. Here, a yes/no question which ought to have a verbal answer as a pair part does not elicit that response, but a gesture. It reflects a linguistic practice among the people. Ezeulu understands that his friend is not asking a question but trying to open a conversation on the matter in order to get first-hand information and to empathize with him.

Pride

In *Arrow of God*, the main character Ezeulu's pride gets him in trouble from the very beginning. Angered by the Umuaro community's decision to ignore him in the matter of going to war with Okperi, he nurses his silent grudge for years. Since Ezeulu is the priest of Ulu, the highest god in Umuaro, Ezeulu shouldn't worry about being #1 – but his jealous pride for his status eventually causes him to take revenge against the people of Umuaro. Ezeulu isn't the only one who is proud. Winterbottom accuses all Igbo men of putting on airs; he argues that if you give an Igbo man a little bit of authority, he will soon be abusing even his own relatives. Winterbottom says that Igbo men love titles,

not realizing that his men, Clarke and Wright, have made similar comments about how much Winterbottom loves his own title, “Captain.”

Race Culture and Language

In *Arrow of God*, differences between Africans and the British are interpreted racially by both Igbo and British characters alike. Race is associated with culture and, thus, is offered as one of the identifying characteristics of British power. Winterbottom recognizes the power inherent in moral suasion and argues forcefully that white men in Nigeria must behave a certain way in order to maintain their political superiority. In *Arrow of God*, both the British Captain Winterbottom and the Igbo Ezeulu have inflated senses of duty, which might be why the two men like each other. Winterbottom believes it is his duty to maintain decorum, keep a high moral standard, be an example to others, and be obedient to the Administration’s whims even when he doesn’t agree. Ezeulu, alternatively, believes that he must do whatever the god Ulu requires of him, even when it’s distasteful, and even when he personally suffers as a result. *Arrow of God* revolves around competition. We see competition between Ezeulu’s wives for his attention; between Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, and Ezidemili, the chief priest of the lesser deity Idemili; between the communities of Umuaro and Okperi; and between Ezeulu’s village and Ezidemili’s village. But the most important competition is between the god Ulu and the Christian god. This fight is always in the background, and we realize that *Arrow of God* is an illustration of the saying “When two brothers fight, a stranger reaps the harvest.” As the region roils in division, Christianity quietly steps in and takes the respect and place of honor that had previously belonged to the god Ulu.

Much of *Arrow of God*’s plot is precipitated by revenge. If Umuaro hadn’t wanted to claim ownership of that land, they wouldn’t have sent an emissary to Okperi who was clearly bent on starting a war. That emissary causes his own death, but Okperi fails to send a courteous message about it, so Umuaro must respond by starting the war. Just as entire regions seek revenge, individuals seek satisfaction for real or perceived wrongs. Ezeulu seeks revenge on the people of Umuaro, who fail to give him proper respect as the priest of Ulu. Ezeulu’s revenge results in famine and ultimately causes the demise of his own deity.

Religion in Culture and Language

Arrow of God explores how Igbo spirituality and religious life dies an ignominious death when confronted by Christianity. Christianity is backed by the white man’s military and political power. As a result, Christianity is also identified with the source of their power. When the people of Umuaro are faced with famine because the chief priest of Ulu refuses to break tradition, the catechist at the church offers protection so the people can harvest their yams. When Ezeulu’s son Obika dies, the people interpret that as a sign that Ulu was punishing his priest. With Ezeulu’s power broken, Umuaro turns to the Christian god for help.

Traditions dictate the lives of the people of Umuaro. Seasons are punctuated by rituals, and festivals are managed by the priests of the various deities associated with each village. The overall deity, Ulu, provides the important purification rites as well as feast associated with the rhythms of agriculture. In *Arrow of God* we see that these traditions are undermined by the coming of Christianity, the power of the British colonial office, and, most importantly, by Ezeulu’s inflexibility and insistence on adhering to tradition. Ezeulu insists on waiting a full month

to eat each sacred yam, even though that means he can't call the Feast of the New Yam for another three months. Meanwhile, the people's crops are rotting in the field and people are starving to death. The elders of Umuaro offer to take the punishment on themselves, but Ezeulu refuses. While Ezeulu is stubbornly following tradition – and punishing his people – the people of Umuaro slowly begin to starve because they are unable to harvest the crops.

A lust for power motivates many of the characters in *Arrow of God*. As the British administration's power rises, the men in Umuaro discover that their power is diminishing. All the men discover that their power is limited when the British administration steps in and stops the war with Okperi. Meanwhile, Nwaka and Ezidemili accuse Ezeulu of desiring power in order to mask their own attempts to unseat him and usurp his place. Ezeulu punishes the people of Umuaro because they didn't accord him and his deity Ulu proper respect. The power struggle between Ezeulu and the people of Umuaro gives the Christian catechist, Mr. Goodcountry, the opportunity to win converts. The book concludes with Ezeulu's power receding as Christianity takes precedence.

Manhood in Igbo life is marked by stages of life – marriage, fatherhood, gaining titles, becoming an elder. A man accrues respect, rights, and power as he moves through the stages of life. Though Obika may drink too much, he is still admired as a man because he is handsome and has physical prowess. Edogo, on the other hand, is steady and dependable, but not flashy; he gets little respect from the people of Umuaro.

Respect and Reputation:

In *Arrow of God*, respect and reputation are highly valued in both Igbo and British cultures. The careers of colonial officials are built on their reputations, as are the careers of men in Igbo culture. In both cultures, titled men and elders have more power than young men or men who lack titles. We see Wright and Clarke gossip about Winterbottom; their attempt to destroy his reputation is also an attempt to build themselves up. Ezeulu feels the sting of the people's lack of respect, first when they ignore his opinion and go to war with Okperi and finally when they continue to blame him for the white man's arrival. Ultimately, it is the destruction of Ezeulu's reputation that causes the people of Umuaro to convert to Christianity. Achebe makes the reader live in the story in his hands. The reader feels admiration for Ezeulu as he stands as his own man, yet wonder at the extent of his self-destruction. Still the reader is not quick to blame him too much as the reader knows the result may have been different if his son sent to be his 'eyes' had had his neck firmly on his own head. You will laugh reading this book as it contains a lot of memorable lines. Some of my favourites:

“When suffering knocks at your door and you say there's no seat left for him, he tells you not to worry because he brought his own stool”. “How are your people?” “Nobody has died.” “When brothers fight to death a stranger inherits their father's estate”

Some lines cause you to ponder. A few: “The first thought that comes to Ezeulu on seeing him was to wonder whether any black man could ever achieve the same mastery over book as to write it with the left hand.” “...even Nwaka sent a son [to the missionary school] — the one who seemed least likely among his children to become a good farmer.” A great and evocative story of how colonialism eventually overcame one of the last standing villages in Igboland. It is how it was done in the most unlikely way that makes the end such a tragedy. The book can be long-winding in its

description of objects and places and I often skipped paragraphs when the descriptions seem not to have an end in sight, yet I recommend a reading not least because Achebe himself says this is one novel of his he is most likely to be caught sitting down to read.

Conclusion

Achebe makes the reader live in the story in his hands. The reader feels admiration for Ezeulu as he stands as his own man, yet wonder at the extent of his self-destruction. Still the reader is not quick to blame him too much as the reader knows the result may have been different if his son sent to be his 'eyes' has had his neck firmly on his own head. As the book ends, the missionary church uses the opportunity to court the attention of the desperate villagers and implore them to come under the Christian god who can provide them immunity to harvest their yams without consequences from their village god.

The reader can see how Ezeulu self-destructs despite his foresight at sending his son to learn the ways of the white man. We can also see the cultural demise of his village as they embrace the Christian god and forsake their local god.

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