



THE CONTEXT

Quarterly e-journal of English Studies

International, Indexed & Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal

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Post colonial Dualism in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*

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ABSTRACT

Dualism can be meant for the divisional aspects of human life which includes the opposing thoughts or contrasted ideas in the conceptual framework of literariness. This idea includes two fundamental kinds or categories of things or principles which is believed to be impregnated with the creation or combination of good and bad in the universe. The thought came from the existence of God and Devil for making balance between the good and bad and giving the importance of good in the existence of evils. The present paper explores the post-colonial dualism in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*.

Keywords: Colonialism, Dualism, cosmologic, epistemological, monism, existentialism, division, and combination.

FULL PAPER

Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God* (1964), in the exploration of the roots of traditional values of the African past is to examine the reasons behind the cultural dislocation of a traditional way of life uprooted from its original identity. This kind of a situation does not find solutions in a simple manner, because the confusion and the vacuum existing in the Igbo society is a result of the conflicting forces of European and African civilizations. At this point of African history, one can see that the traditional culture is falling apart because it is overwhelmed with forces from within. On one hand, "The Igbos were practicing a complex view of the world which accepted diversity, which accepted the multiplicity of things, of gods even" (Agbabu, 282), and therefore could not oppose the Christian missionaries who encroached them upon their livelihood, on the other hand, there were "the white man... claiming to be the way, the light, the truth" (Agbabu, 282) assuming the blessings of civilization on a society they deemed to have no valid social, moral or political sanctions. When the missionaries took over the administration of the natives, it created a state of confusion between the conflicting forces of eager change and rigid constancy in the people of Africa.

In this novel, there are a series of conflicts that make it complex and a challenging piece of fiction for the readers. There is a conflict between the Christian and the Igbo civilizations, between individual and the community, and perhaps most significantly, between the Divine and human in the form of God and men. In the novels publishing before, one may have seen how the cosmic world of the Igbos governs the human beings, rewarded, governed or punished by the Supreme Creator, Chukwu. Relating the story to the previous novels, the protagonist in *Arrow of God* is a priest. The nature of his work, particularly in the Igbo traditional world, places him at a highly distinguished position in the social ladder. Not only this, he is the intermediary between the human and the spirit; or to put it differently, he is the divine spirit intermediary inhabiting the mortal world. The conventional cosmic world of Igbos is based on a healthy inter-dependence between man and God. The world of the ancestral spirits constantly interacts with the worldly affairs of human beings. The fate of the individual is decided more or less completely by 'chi' or the spiritual double, but ultimately it is a man who occupies a very prominent position in this cosmic world. In order to comprehend the dilemma of the tragic protagonist of the novel, *Arrow of God*, one must keep in mind an observation of the novelist, who writes in his essay *Chi in Igbo Cosmology*: "The Igbo... postulate the concept of every man as both unique creation and the work of a unique creator... the Igbo are unlikely to concede to the individual an absolutism they deny even to chi, the obvious curtailment of a man's power to walk alone and do as his will is provided by another potent force - the will of his community" (Morning Yet on Creation Day, 168). It is precisely this dualism which provides the tension between human individualism and the collective will, as represented by the protagonist, Ezeulu's devotion to a unique god as opposed

to the community's recognition of the need to live in harmony with the natural forces, a tension that is brought to a climax in the sacred ceremony of the New Yam.

The story of the novel tells us that Ezeulu is the Chief Priest of Ulu, the most powerful deity in the six villages of Umuaro. He has to perform the two most important rituals in the villages - the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves and that of the New Yam. At the beginning of the novel, he is looking disturbed on the nature of his power, "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 the day. He was simply a watchman" (AOG, 3) because he thinks, "What kind of power was it if everybody knew that it would never be used?" (AOG, 4) The feast of the New Yam sanctifies the harvest and marks the commencement of the new session. Judging from the complexity of Ezeulu's characterization, Achebe has remarked: "To attempt to interpret Ezeulu in a simplistic manner is bound to be problematic" (Agbabu, 282). In the second preparation of the festival, Ezeulu is introduced as someone right at the outset, the tension between his conflicting loyalties - towards the community, to the god, and at a more complex level, to himself. As he peers into the sky to look for the new moon that will herald the beginning of a new year, he is anxious about his community depending on his time-keeping and taking risk. His individuality is identified when he refuses to proclaim the New Yam Festival: "An adult does not sit and watch while the she-goat suffers the pain of child-birth" (AOG, 21). Ezeulu's ruthless exercise of his power is incipient in the enjoyment he experiences in making young men wince at his handshake. These two contrary abilities drive him in his nature, one as protector, other as a dominating figure in his African reflective meditations. It is these kinds of reflections that anticipate his impending tragedy of the novel.

It can be taken as the social record of the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized and its gruesome impact on both the psychological and social levels. In this connection, one can say that Achebe's basic theme in all his novels, especially the one's set in the past is to educate his people that they had a rich cultural past that was seriously disturbed by the colonial intrusion. In this interpretation, the novel can be seen as another response to the superficial domination of Africa as seen in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*. Achebe parodies the image of Africa as seen in *Mister Johnson* by presenting a view of social cohesion and order in his novel, particularly at the beginning. The background of the novel is narrated by C. L. Innes: "The basic story of *Arrow of God* is based on an actual incident, recorded by Simon Nnolim in 'The History of Umichu' (Innes, 64) in which a priest rejected a chieftaincy for which he was imprisoned. This story relates to the story of the novel in some way because the narrative of *Arrow of God* rounds about the Chief priest, but one can also witness a coherent society where marriage, parenthood and even family are never the matter of private concerns. The people of Umuaro, are often seen nameless but vibrantly alive and they seem to serve the novel with a thickness of life by adding the local colour in the novel. This world is highly reminiscent of the Umuofian society of *Things Fall Apart*, in so far as it is also a victim of the colonial powers. Yet there are a several ways

in which *Things Fall Apart* differs from *Arrow of God* despite the obvious similarity of colonial experience and the proximity in the fictional time.

One of the main differences between Achebe's third novel and *Things Fall Apart* is that *Arrow of God* that is much more concerned about the complex relationships and rivalries, the jealous concern for status and power. Although Okonkwo is a product of a society that places him at high value on material achievement but Ezeulu is surrounded by a whole web of conflicts and rivalries. There are also remarkable differences between the protagonists of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Unlike Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Ezeulu is a man of incisive thought: "His mind still persisted in trying to look too closely at the nature of his power" (Innes, 4). He is firm in sticking to his decision, even if he runs a risk of even disagreeing with his community. He is not haunted by psychological fears of being thought weak by his society. He is a peaceful man, who is opposed to fighting a war of blame against his villagers, even at the cost of earning criticism by his rivals and fellowman. He is introspective and self-questioning. Ezeulu is also a man of intelligence which can be deduced from the fact that he comprehends, before anyone else, the nature of the dilemma posed by the presence of the white men in their culture, which signals an age of new adjustments, a need for moving with the times, "The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in the same place" (Innes, 55). This variety of perspectives provides a background for traditional Igbo values thereby raising issues concerning individual and communal authority, an important concern of the novel in the context of post-colonial dualism.

As his ceremonial appearance discloses, Ezeulu, being the Chief Priest of Ulu appears as a half man and half spirit and his left half of his body was painted with white chalk. This is really a symbolic suggestion of his place in the social and cosmic scheme of things. As a vehicle for divine prophecy, Ezeulu occupies an important position in the chain of beings, looking higher than mortals and lower than the gods. To be the Chief Priest of Ulu is also a proud, opinionated and domineering for a man like Ezeulu. Despite enjoying such an elevated status, there is a dissension amongst his people about the nature of his authority that has been challenged five years ago, in which he had forbidden his people to fight a war of blame, for a piece of land, with the village of Okperi, because the land was not rightfully theirs as it was interpreted by his rivals and detractors. In fact, Ezeulu is seen to be wrestling with a series of adversaries. He has to deal simultaneously with the adherents of the rival god Idemili, who holds political power, and with the district officer, Captain Winterbottom, who will choose Ezeulu to be his warrant chief in Umuaro. It will precipitate the crisis in the novel.

Professor Robert Wren has revealed a very important aspect of the god Ulu in a brilliant essay that gives an added layer of meaning to the novel. In a revised version of the novel, the god Ulu is speaking directly to his priest, saying, "Leave me to settle my quarrel with Idemili, whose envy seeks to destroy me so that his python may again come to power" (AOG, 240). More importantly, Ulu, unlike Idemili, was created, at about the same time as Umuaro, where most of the action of the novel takes

place. In order to explore the complicated nature of power struggle in the novel, one can examine the nature and the origin of the god Ulu and the nature of power enjoyed by his Chief Priest. Umuaro is a group of six villages that have come together not because of mutual respect and loyalty but in a forced alliance caused to protect them against being victimized the neighbouring clan, by the fierce warriors of Abam. Medicine of the utmost power created Ulu, surviving because of the unwilling, yet fear-induced sense of unity between the six villages. The importance of the god Ulu is in proportion to the threat posed by the people of Abam. This is because the threat of Abam' is a thing of the past. Ezeulu's most antagonistic rival Nwaka, reveals this, when he says "we have no quarrel with Olu. He is still our protector, even though we no longer fear Abam warriors at night..." (AOG, 33) This statement finds evidence in the actual historical events in Africa around the time the novel is set. The British Administration did indeed overpower the tribes of the Abam, known as Aros, in order to set an example for the rest of colonized Africa. Returning to the novel, the Abams have been subjugated by the British, and hence, the villages no longer need the god to protect them. In this state of affairs, Nwaka, locked in what is essentially a power struggle with Ezeulu, dares to issue indirect threats of the annihilation of the out of use god stating: "Did they not carry him to the boundary between them and their neighbours and set fire on him?" (AOG, 33)

Yet, perhaps the term out of use is a little too strong, even incorrect if applied to Ulu. In this way one must remember that his priest has the important function of performing two major Festivals, the New Yam Festival and the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves. Certainly, Ezeulu's position is threatened due to colonial as well as internal forces, but it is not totally disrespected. Ezeulu's position has been undermined to a great extent due to the colonial intrusion. It is because of the British authority that the warriors of Abam are no longer victimizing the villagers of Umuaro. This colonial interference has also weakened the spiritual power that united the people of Umuaro. The war with Okperi, which was fought despite Ezeulu's objection, was handled by the British Government land that interceded to stop the war and give the in question to Okperi. A serious rivalry exists in the internal matters of the village, which is not a result of colonial encroachment. It is a timeless struggle for power that comes with the assumption of traditional authority. The Priest of Ulu by virtue of being a guardian of well-being and the keeper of the social calendar, is a thorn in the side of his rivals, waiting to depose him from his enviable position. In his essay, critic Emmanuel Obiechina asserts that "Ezeulu's protection of authority is not only religious, political, military and ethical, but also economic, as he calls the biggest feast of the the year, the Feast of the New Yam that ushers in harvest season" (Emmanuel, 173). The surprise, however, is the absence of euphoria in Ezeulu right from the beginning of the novel. His conception of power is exorbitant, but is tinged with the question of the exact nature of his power where Ezeulu questions the limitation of his power.

The rivalry between Ezeulu and Ezeidemili is related not only to a power struggle but to a more complicated query into the nature of divinity. On the one hand,

Ezeulu says: "No matter how great or strong a man was he should never challenge his chi". On the other hand, Nwaka refuses to accept the absolute authority of the Priest. He admits that Ezeulu is greedy for power: "he wants to be king, priest, diviner, all" (AOG, 33). This accusation may not be totally false, but it is not completely correct either. There is no doubt that Ezeulu enjoys the power he exercises over his clan yet it is also true that, "He believed in his priesthood...to be considered advanced or in order to make things convenient for anybody" (Agbabu, 282). Hence, Ezeulu in terms of power-hungry priest alone is to misinterpret him: "He swore to uphold this priesthood, its rites and rituals. And so, for someone to come and tell him go and eat those yams because time is running out or go on is unrealistic" (Agbabu, 282). At the same time, he is well aware of the changing times. He has therefore tried to adjust with the new culture that the colonizers have ushered in, and it is this that makes him send his son to a mission school to become his 'eye' there. Yet his awareness of the encroachment of the white civilization does not reduce his concern over the way his world is changing. This analogy serves several functions. It contains an essential nature of the colonial intrusion which is an important theme in the novel. Ezeulu is aware that the alien power is as powerful and as incurable as an unconquered disease. He understands the necessity to be on the right side of the British administration, and he is aware that his son's exposure to the alien culture will help him maintain a balance of power, should a conflict of interest arise.

The struggle for power and position is an important feature in this novel. Set in the year 1921, *Arrow of God* is separated from *Things Fall Apart* by about twenty years in terms of the historical time reflected in the novel. While the missionaries had begun to infiltrate at the century, by now the Britishers are well established in the African soil. The traditional values are no longer resisting the British forces: they are trying to adjust with the alien culture. Ezeulu's approach to adjust with the time can be seen as the recession of the traditional values he represents. Yet it is a pragmatic and a practical approach to take in the face of growing disorder and confusion. The alien civilization has brought not only a choice of religion but also of government, which operates from Okperi, the 'Gorment Heel', as it is called by the natives, and it is necessary for the power-holders of the old world order to strike the right equation with the European colonizers. Ezeulu is able to answer his detractors in a proverb that is repeated like a refrain in this novel: "The man who brings ant-ridden faggots into his hut should not grumble when lizards begin to pay him a visit" (AOG, 163) implying that the Igbos are themselves responsible for allowing the colonizers to settle in their country and must therefore bear the consequences. His testimony against his own village in the land dispute with Okperi is still quoted by his rivals and detractors, and this is yet another point under attack by his fellowmen. This action is seen by them as a strategy for reinforcing his personal power by ingratiating himself with the British administration. The resentment that has been brewing for some time results in a crisis precipitated by his son Oduche. In his enthusiasm as a Christian student, he is provoked into committing what is an act of sacrilege in the Igbo world order - he tries to kill a python by capturing him into a box, hoping that it would die of suffocation. In this case, the crisis adds another blow to the already weakening

position of the Chief Priest. This episode is interpreted by his rivals and clansmen alike as an attempt by Ezeulu to reach a personal accommodation with the forces that are posing a threat to the social order. This is also seen as an insult to the traditions of Igbo society.

In this connection, one should examine the world of the British community which exists side by side with the world of Umuaro. Although there are only five men on Government Hill in Okperi, Captain Winterbottom is insistent about the rigid hierarchy of power. This was the time in history when the British government was changing its strategy of ruling the natives. Captain Winterbottom has received a directive to introduce an Indirect Rule in his area of authority. Like Ezeulu, he is mainly concerned with question of power. He does not approve of the British government's policy of Indirect Rule, which he is forced to carry out. Like the Chief Priest of Ulu, he does not like the idea of being simply an intermediary of power. And yet, while Ezeulu and Winterbottom parallel each other in being rigid figures of authority, they are not identical to each other. This is because in the ultimate analysis, both these men operate according to different frames of reference. The Igbo traditional ethic of governing is essentially, religious whereas the British government's ethic is secular. Oduche's sacrilegious act gives Ezeulu's detractors an opportunity to criticize him spiritedly. At this crucial point, Ezeulu, who is also a very stubborn individual, decides to support his actions by protecting a view of himself as being superior to the rest of the clan. This is really the origin of his idea of seeing himself as the arrow in the bow of his god, which flares into madness and causes his tragedy. Even when he is warned by his friend Akuebe about the dangers of willfulness, Ezeulu maintains stubbornly that his policy as a priest is beyond mortal comprehension. This suggests the beginning of the down fall of Ezeulu since he has developed a habit of rationalizing his actions by elevating himself from the rest of mankind. This kind of self-righteousness, this movement from the secular to the divine frame of reference contains in it the germs of tragedy.

A psychological hurt, enforced on the society as a divine will, was bound to end in a tragedy, especially when it attacks the very pulse of existence - the life-rhythms of the farming year. This starts the process of the dialectic between the tribe and the god. "A priest like Ezeulu leads a god to ruin himself. Or perhaps, a god like Ulu leads a priest to ruin himself" (AOG, 266). The people of Umuaro, faced with the ordeal of famine and hunger, find an alternative in the harvest festival of the missionaries. A need for survival makes the confounded people turn to Christian religion for salvation. The personal crisis of Ezeulu comes in the form of his favourite son Obika's death. Ezeulu sees this as a sign of Ulu's disapproval of his conduct as the chief priest. Alienated from his own society, in his self-righteous belief that he was the arrow of Ulu, Ezeulu loses control over his mental balance. He spends the last of his days "in the haughty splendor of a demented high priest" (AOG, 287).

To conclude, the novel can be interpreted in several ways but the most powerfully it can be noted for its post-colonial dualism in which one character plays the light as well as serious role in the form of priesthood and individual high ranked

identity. At one level, it is a critique of the colonial infiltration and its traumatic impact on the people of Africa. At another level, it is a political novel, dealing different power systems vis-a-vis the colonial encounter as well as the conflict of power within the tribe. The most powerfully, this novel can be seen as a tragic life of a priest unable to define the boundaries of his power. The novel is also a faithful document of the decline of the traditional values in African societies vis-a-vis Umuaro. Perhaps Achebe puts it best when he summarizes these interpretations in quintessence: "Ezeulu was caught at a time in history perhaps when it was inevitable that the chief priest of Ulu should be sacrificed so that his people could move into the modern world" (Agbabu, 282).

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