

THE IDENTITY QUESTION AND INTRA COMMUNAL CONFLICTS: A READING OF *ARROW OF GOD*

Dr. Debabhuson Borah, Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Majuli College, Assam

Abstract:

*Chinua Achebe's trilogy responds to a series of critical periods in Nigerian history since 1890 including the introduction and imposition of European 'culture' and law in Eastern Nigeria and the unforeseen consequences of the attempt by Igbos to adapt that culture. In this process, Achebe seems to perform his role as a cultural nationalist, restoring the picture of the African past so crudely distorted by the colonizers. While also denying the fact that the Africans could have a 'human' culture, the colonial powers generally deprived the Africans of their historicity, projecting Africa as the 'heart of darkness'. The present paper attempts to study the identity question and intra communal conflicts in Achebe's *Arrow of God*.*

Key Words: *Culture, Igbos, Nationalist, Colonial powers.*

Part of my artistic and intellectual inheritance is derived from a cultural tradition in which it was possible for artists to create objects of art which were solid enough and yet make no attempt to claim, and sometimes even go to great lengths to deny, personal ownership of what they have created¹ ("The Writer and His Community", 48).

Chinua Achebe's trilogy² responds to a series of critical periods in Nigerian history since 1890 including the introduction and imposition of European 'culture' and law in Eastern Nigeria and the unforeseen consequences of the attempt by Igbos to adapt that culture. In this process, Achebe seems to perform his role as a cultural nationalist, restoring the picture of the African past so crudely distorted by the colonizers. While also denying the fact that the Africans could have a 'human' culture, the colonial powers generally deprived the Africans of their historicity, projecting Africa as the 'heart of darkness'. Achebe, therefore, began writing novels partly in reaction to the European representation of Africa and its natives. His position is quite clear:

... as far as I am concerned the fundamental theme must first be disposed of. This theme—put quite simply—is that African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity that they must now regain ... The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost ("The Role of the Writer in the New Nation" as cited in *Chinua Achebe*, 104).

In response to the colonizer's creation of stereotypes vis-à-vis the African culture and community, Achebe aims at providing a fresh and invigorating insight into African history and his depiction of 'Africa' in his trilogy focuses on the Igbo community of Nigeria. In his first novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe clearly shows that there is a coherent social order in the Igbo community. At the same time, Achebe shows certain drawbacks in the Igbo community in the novel. Like *Things Fall Apart*, his third novel *Arrow of God* (1964) also reveals the impact of colonialism in the Igbo community and the rupture it entails along with the conflicts generated by the influx of alien values and cultural practices. But in comparison with *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* provides a much more critical insight into the Igbo community. The story

revolves round a series of conflicts: conflicts between white colonial administrative authority and traditional Igbo authority, between the villagers of Umuaro and Okperi, conflicts and rivalries between the clansman, and conflicts between family members. My attempt in this paper, however, is to see how the novelist addresses the identity question in the Igbo community through a series of conflicts in *Arrow of God* and how such intra communal conflicts lead to the beginning of a new phase in the community.

Nigeria is characterized by three major distinct ethnic groups- Igbos in the south east, Hausas in the north and Yorubas in the west. However, one of the most distinct features of the Igbo society is the absence of absolute power. In marked contrast to the Yoruba and the Hausa, the Igbo people have no centralized body or source of power. Kings and chiefs are virtually absent in the Igbo social fabric. Every single lineage in an Igbo village lives under the moral authority of an elder known as the 'Okpara'. Each village exists as an autonomous political unit in the absence of a central power structure. (In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* we see that each Igbo village, like Umuofia, Mbaino, Mbanta, Abame etc. is an autonomous political unit) The villages are interlinked by means of matrimonial alliances, titles, beliefs in gods and deities, oracles, religious men and shrines. Intra village marriage is prohibited and it, in turn, serves as a crucial unifying factor amongst the different villages.

The system of titles have a significant role in integrating the villages as it denotes status, prestige and regard while making demands from people for its attainment. Titles among the Igbos are not conferred by authority such as a king or chief but by payment of initiation fees by those who have succeeded in earning wealth by their own efforts. Men of titles are respected and honoured not only in their respective villages but in the other villages as well. Moreover, religion and belief play an important role in integrating the villages. Disputes are settled by making appeals to the gods and the oracles. The Igbos believe in the existence of many deities, ghosts and spirits. Three important classifications, however, emerge in terms of belief and faith: the worship of Chukwu, the supreme god, the worship of ancestors or public deities and the cult of personal god or Chi. In the context of such social and cultural practices, however, Achebe presents the Igbo community and the conflicts within it in *Arrow of God*. Let us come to the prime issue in the paper.

In *Arrow of God*, from the very beginning, there is a constant focus on complex relationships and rivalries, and the jealous concern for status influences almost every social contact shown in the novel. Ezeulu, the protagonist of the novel, is surrounded by a whole web of conflicts and rivalries. His eldest son Edogo is troubled by his father's preference for Obika and Nwafo; his two wives are constantly quarrelling and jealously guarding the rights of their children; the children are also seen more often quarrelling. But above all, there is rivalry between Nwaka and Ezeulu, and between Ezademli and Ezeulu, as well as between the different villages so that at the time of the story 'a few people from the one village would touch palm wine or kolanut which had passed through the hands of a man from the other' (*Arrow of God*, 38).

It seems that the novelist gives different voices to the characters, thereby creating and maintaining a general atmosphere of hostility in the novel. We are given a series of contrasting views and voices in accordance with the contrasting cultural perspectives of the Igbo community. In Umuchu, there is a number of quite different views- not only those that represent the conflict between generations, and between Christians and believers of tradition, but also the opposing views and statements of Ezeulu and Ezidemili concerning the founding of Umuchu and the status of their gods. Similarly, there are conflicts between Ezeulu and Nwaka concerning the farmland claimed by Okperi, and between Akuebue and Ofoka concerning the motives for Ezeulu's actions. But the novelist presents such conflicts as if these are very common to any society, as Nwaka says "Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own." (*Arrow of God*, 16). In the dispute between Nwaka and Ezeulu, however, the reader is given no indications as to which version is correct and it is Nwaka's rhetorical skill together with his insinuations concerning Ezeulu's biasness towards his mother's home village that sways the assembly.

This variety of perspectives is fundamental to the theme of the novel in three ways. First, as already

mentioned above, in comparison with *Things Fall Apart* it provides a much more convincing and complex portrayal of a traditional community and the tensions and rivalries which make it active and vital. Secondly, this community becomes both the background and the most stringent test for traditional Igbo forms of policy making and leadership. And thirdly, these opposing perspectives are concerned with what seems to us to be one of the central themes of the novel, the problem of 'knowing', a problem which Ezeulu confronts from the very first chapter of the novel and which eventually generates almost all the conflicts in the narrative. We are told by the novelist that Ezeulu's mind is 'never content with shallow satisfaction' and it creeps to 'the brinks of knowing'. (*Arrow of God*, 4) To put it another way, *Arrow of God* is also about the problem of authority, for which the conflicts arise in the novel. Questions are left to the reader as to whom or what to believe and follow, as David Carroll complains:

“...the author is unwilling to commit himself finally on the precise relationship between inner and outer, Ezeulu's need for power and god he worships...” (*Chinua Achebe*, 123)

It may be because Achebe wishes to leave the reader grappling with the problem of 'knowing' and perhaps therefore, the inter relationship between power and naming is established in the very first chapter of the novel. This inter relationship between power and naming can be deemed crucial when we look at the beginning of the conflicts in the tribe:

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... If he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival- no planting and no reaping. But could he refuse? ... he would not dare... Ezeulu was stung to anger by this as his enemy had spoken it. (*Arrow of God*, 3-4)

The novelist, thus, introduces the seed of conflict in the community in the very beginning and such thought plays a significant part towards the end of the novel. During his imprisonment in Okperi, Ezeulu misses two occasions meant for consuming the sacred yams. By refusing to eat two extra yams, he holds up the New Yam Festival. His refusal causes deep concern among the villagers who apprehend an imminent starvation. However, the three paragraphs following that quoted above, establish not only Ezeulu's priestly role and character but also the forces which limit and contest his power. The irony is that Ezeulu records the months and the seasons, but in turn the months and the seasons gradually rob him of his strength and sight. Thus, it can be said that Ezeulu's refusal to name the New Yam festival leading to the greatest conflict in the community, is the result of his limitation as a priest.

Nevertheless, Ezeulu does not reconsider his action though his hurt pride sees in it a vindication. Hence he sees the white man's coming as 'to tell the villagers the truth they knew but hated to hear' (*Arrow of God*, 7). For Ezeulu his priestly role involves speaking the truth he knows, for '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?' (*Arrow of God*, 7). In the next chapter, Ezeulu warns his community the consequences of fighting an unjust war but the issue of speaking the truth gets complicated by the problem of knowing what the truth is. Ezeulu is utterly convinced that his version is the authoritative one, because he got it from his father who was also a priest of Ulu. But Nwaka does not consider it as true; he says:

We know that a father does not speak falsely to his son. But we also know that the lore of the land is beyond the knowledge of many fathers... Ezeulu speaks about events which are older than Umuaro itself... My father told me a different story... (*Arrow of God*, 16).

The issue of which story is 'true' is left unresolved, and the conflict goes on, although the community chooses Nwaka's as the most persuasive one. (Later, yet another version is given by Winterbottom, who, however, omits the whole history of the founding of the gods and of the rivalries between the community leaders.) Then, what does Achebe want the reader to understand through the three

contrasting versions of the Okperi war? Doesn't he want to show that there are conflicts in and within the tribe even from the past?

It is mentioned above that Achebe, in his commitment to present the Igbo community, does not hesitate to point out the flaws within it in *Things Fall Apart*. (For instance, abandoning of the twins and sick in the forest) Here also he does not romanticize the Igbo past. The conflicts in the community, thus, can be seen as a part of the Igbo legacy.

In the second chapter of the novel, we are told that to protect themselves from the raids of the Abame, six villages assembled and 'hired a strong team of medicine-men to install a common deity for them. This deity which the fathers of the six villages made was called Ulu... The six villages then took the name of Umuaro, and the priest of Ulu became their chief Priest...' (*Arrow of God*, 15). The making and allocating of gods by man is further emphasized in Ezeulu's story of how the villagers of Okperi gave the Umuaroans their deities- their Udo and their Ogwugwu and insisted that they call the deities not Udo but the son of Udo. And again in the same chapter Akukalia tells a different story of the creation of gods. In fact, such different opinions regarding the creation of god increase the conflicts in the community. Such opinions also evoke questions like what is the status of gods created by man or what authorities can they or their priests maintain? Such questions often do haunt Ezeulu's dreams:

That night Ezeulu saw in a dream a big assembly of Umuaro elders, the same people he had spoken to a few days earlier. But instead of himself it was his grandfather who rose up to speak to them. They refused to listen. They shouted together: *He shall not speak; We will not listen to him...* 'Why should we rely on him to tell us the seasons of the year?' asked Nwaka. 'Is there anybody here who can not see the moon in his own compound?'... Then the people seized the Chief Priest who had changed from Ezeulu's grandfather to himself and the people began to push him from one group to another... (*Arrow of God*, 159).

Nwaka's challenge, thus, significantly raises questions that lie at the core of the novel: if man can create gods, why should he not destroy them? Since every man can see the moon himself and record the seasons, what need is there for gods or priests? Nwaka's view, thus, largely and really contributes to the conflicts when a council of the elders is summoned by Ezeulu to discuss the call of the Whites. Ezeulu's sincere appeal to discuss the issue is received with outbursts of dissension. Nwaka skillfully misconstrues the Whiteman's decision as an act of vindication of friendship with the Chief Priest.

Ezeulu has told us that the White ruler has asked him to go to Okperi. Now it is not clear for me whether it is wrong for a man to ask his friend to visit him... he did not send for me... he did not send for the Priest of Eru... he has asked for Ezeulu. Why? Because they are friends... (*Arrow of God*, 177).

Such views finally make the elders to oppose the action of Ezeulu. Here the novelist skillfully links the implications of the dream with the real conflicts in the community.

However, Ezeulu's role as the carrier of the communal spirit or as a leader is of course the role emphasized in the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves. In this case, the community is not an abstract thing as Ugoye's individual prayer reminds us. But nevertheless, what the novelist also seems to suggest here is that the community is greater than each individual. And it is perhaps this that Ulu represents: the spirit of the community. Nwaka's question is significant in this respect since it proclaims the supremacy of each individual.

The mythical journey related during the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves is a counter point to the journey that Ezeulu makes towards the end of the novel, as he returns from Okperi. Having refused to wait for Obika or other representatives of his community to accompany him, Ezeulu starts his journey and the rain drenches him all along the road. The novelist seems to use the image of the rain as it serves not to purify Ezeulu and Umuaro of their transgression but rather to soak them in. 'This rain was part of the suffering to which he had been exposed... The more he suffered the greater would be the joy of revenge. His mind

sought out new grievances to pile upon all the others' (*Arrow of God*, 182). Thus, Ezeulu brings his grievances against his community and it is his personal and individual pride for which he seeks to avenge. In later passages, it becomes clear that he has made the mistake of abstracting and separating Ulu that he serves from its communal spirit. Once Ezeulu sets himself and Ulu apart from and against his community both lose their primary role and meaning.

There is a moment after his return from Okeperi when Ezeulu begins to acknowledge his responsibility and his failure. Softened by the welcomes of many of the people, he can no longer think of the community as abstraction, 'as one hostile entity'. And after the visit of Ofoka who reminds Ezeulu that it was his duty to 'wrestle' with the White men, Ezeulu concludes that 'it was right that the Chief Priest should go ahead and conform danger before it reached the people' (*Arrow of God*, 189) and he recalls the mythical journey of the first priest of Ulu. One might compare this moment with the one at the end of part 1 of *Things Fall Apart* when Obierika reflects on his friend's banishment. In Obierika's case, the reader is left to move outside the proverbial network in order to pass judgement on the failure of the community. But when Ezeulu 'puts aside his thought to cool', the reader must think about the reference to the mythical journey in order to pass judgement on the failure of Ezeulu, and to respond to the 'voice' of Ulu. Given the reminder that Ulu is a creation of man, one must see Ezeulu's submission to Ulu's authority as if he were a mere arrow in the bow of god. Ezeulu's delight in finding a single pattern, thus, does not only create a hostile situation for him, but also leads to the destruction of communal unity in Umuaro. The community falls apart once again as the Christian missionaries take charge and perform the harvest festival in the name of their Christian God. An entire village on the brink of starvation decides to discard their god and to look forward to the new order symbolized by the new religion.

In *Arrow of God*, Achebe presents a critical picture of the Igbo past without any kind of idealization. In a way, the novel attempts to subvert colonial construction of Africa by offering a society with various social and cultural practices. That had rendered the 'identity' to the Igbos. What Achebe specifically achieves in the novel is to foreground the element of change inherent in any society and the vindication of a society entangled with its own fallacies and faults. And the conflicts represented in the novel, to a great extent, help him to show it.

Notes

1. In this respect Achebe talks about the *mabari* art of Igboland. It is an artistic spectacular demanded of the community by one or other of its primary divinities, usually the Earth goddess.
2. *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964)

Bibliography

1. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Illus. Uche Okeke. London: Heinemann, 1958 (1986)
2. _____. *Arrow of God*. London: Heinemann, 1964 (1986)
3. _____. "The Writer and his Community" in *Hopes and Impediments*. New York: Anchor Books, 1990
4. Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001
5. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006
6. Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. New York: OUP, 1995
7. Carrol, David. *Chinua Achebe*. London: Macmillan, 1980
8. Colson, Elizabeth. "African Society at the Time of Scramble" in *Colonialism in Africa* (1870-1960). Ed. L.H. Gunn and Duignan. London: Cambridge University Press
9. Dathorne, O.R. *African Literature in the Twentieth Century*. London: Heinemann, 1972

10. Davidson, A.B. ed. *A History of Africa (1918-1967)*. Moscow: Nauka Publishing House, 1968
11. Fanon, Franz. *Black Skin, White Mask*. Trans. Charles L. Markmann. London: Pluto, 1968
12. Gunther, John. *Inside Africa*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955
13. Inns, C.L. *Chinua Achebe*. London : Cambridge University Press, 1990
14. Mbiti, John S. *African Religion and Philosophy*. Oxford: Heinemann,
15. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1978
16. Singh, Thingnam Kishan. *Rethinking Colonialism*. Delhi: Worldview, 2006