

RITUAL SACRIFICE IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD*

Abstract

Arrow of God is one of Achebe's works that is widely read and criticized. Some critics notably Dathorn (1975), and Nkosi (1981) consider it as the most complex and ambitious of Achebe's work. For some other critics, *Arrow of God* stands out as the most successful novel of Achebe. This claim is supported by Abiola Irele (1967), John Povey (1971), Michael Echeruo (1975). As a work of art, *Arrow of God* has been criticized from different standpoints. According to Helen Chukwuma (1991) *Arrow of God* is a "study of society in transition", Micheal Echeruo (1975), "it is a past that is only a moment, though a revealing moment, in the continuing history of a people", Chidi, T. Maduka (1999) sees it as the "impact of European colonialism on African culture" and Umelo Ojinmah (1991) sees it as the "study of abuse of power in traditional African society". This paper critically examines ritual sacrifice as a discursive formative, its role within the argumentative structure of the text, and how ritual sacrifices form an organic structure in *Arrow of God*.

Introduction

Within the context of African literary scholarship the works of Achebe is as old as the institution of African literature itself. As a result, some critics are of the opinion that works of Achebe have been over emphasized. In the alternative they advocate for a paradigm shift to new African writings. As strong as the argument may be, literature is a linguistic act that gives rise to endless thought and meditation. As Northrop Frye puts it, "literature ... is an in exhaustible source of new critical discoveries and would be even if new works of literature ceased to be written" (1970:17).

As a linguistic enterprise there is always something inaugural in every reading of a literary work. Following Jacques

Derrida (1978), literature gives rise to "endless meditation". Always there is something new to see and discover in every literary work of art. T.S. Eliot succinctly summarizes this novelty of literature as follows: "Beyond every specific intention which poetry may have ... there is always the communication of some new experience, some fresh understanding of the familiar or the expression of something we have experienced but have no word for, which enlarges our consciousness or refines our sensibilities" (1965:7). This implies that no reading of the literary text can exhaust all the possibilities of meaning. Each reading opens up new possibilities of thought and awareness of literature as a linguistic act. Based on this proposition we inaugurate a critical discussion of ritual sacrifice in Achebe's *Arrow of God*.

Ritual sacrifice forms an intimate and indissoluble aspect of a community's life. It is a set of actions, which is performed for its symbolic value, which is prescribed by religion or by a tradition of the community. According to a leading African scholar, John Mbiti, in *Introduction to African Religion*, (1975), "Africans celebrate life ... they celebrate their religion, they dance it, they sing it, they act it. A lot of the visible demonstration of African religion occurs in rituals and festivals ... Through ritual people not only act their religion but communicate it to the young generation" (126). Ritual becomes a means of communicating the most basic and inert needs of man. Thus, it is a special symbolic form that has a religious significance. But according to David Power, ritual is a way of regulating the life of man in a community. As Foucault will argue, "it forms the locus of human tradition". Thus according to David Power,

historical, anthropological and sociological investigation points to ritual as formalized play. It marks key moments of season and life, it manages order, chaos in times of change, and it is one of the necessities of social ordering and behaviour ... and

expression of harmony with, perception into, and conformity with ... it must be perceived precisely as an expression of a tradition" (1971:85).

In this account of ritual, David Power lays emphasis on ritual as an element of social solidarity. But the question still remains, what constitutes a ritual act or what is communicated in a ritual act itself. According to Mary Wilson, ritual expresses the values of a community. Thus she writes: "Ritual reveals values at the deepest level ... men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is the value of the group that are revealed" (cited by V. W. Turner 1969:6). Ritual act constitutes an intrinsic aspect of life of the community. As a matter of fact, ritual action is always a social action, even if it is directed towards a limited social group; and as such, ritual action performs a stabilizing function within a social group, that of promoting bond of unity.

On the other hand, the word 'sacrifice' in contemporary usage means 'giving up something'. In connection with religion, the word is derived from the Latin word 'sacer' meaning "sacred" and "facere" meaning "to make". Sacrifice denotes the process of making something holy by giving it to God. According to John Mbiti, in *African Religion and Philosophy* (1982), he defines sacrifice as the case where animal life is destroyed in order to present the animal, in part or in whole, to God, supernatural beings, spirits or the living dead (58). This account of sacrifice is flawed because it excludes human sacrifice. In his own account, Ernest Lussier (1977) gives us a different understanding of sacrifice. He writes: "Sacrifice as material oblation made with the purpose of establishing or maintaining communion with the deity. The ceremonial act is an acknowledgement that every thing belongs to God, and at the same time an expression of the desire to draw closer to God" (11).

However, sacrifice can be of various types such as human sacrifice, substitutionary sacrifice, and preventive sacrifice. For the purpose of this essay, the writer agrees with the views of Ernest Lussier that sacrifice is a symbolic act that expresses the desire of the people to honour their god. In this text, the bond of social solidarity is predicated on ritual sacrifice. Umuaro is a community that is built on Ulu's deity. In absence of the ritual sacrifice of Ulu's deity, perhaps there will be nothing like Umuaro. Thus a ritual sacrifice inaugurates a new community known as Umuaro. We read thus:

Things were so bad for the six villages that their leaders came together to save themselves. They 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. Half of the medicine was buried at a place, which became Nkwo market and the other half thrown into the stream, which become Mili Ulu. The six villages then took the name of Umuaro and the priest of Ulu became their Chief Priest. From that day they were never again beaten by an enemy (15).

The emergency of Umuaro is borne out of the threat of Abame soldiers. To forestall this threat is the emergency of Ulu's deity which is a ritual sacrifice on behalf of the people. As a ritual sacrifice, Ulu's deity, marks 'the inaugural naming of all things', (Akwanya, 2005). From this ritual sacrifice, emerges the functions of Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu.

Within the discursive context of the text, ritual sacrifice circumscribes the functions of Ezeulu. One of the functions of Ezeulu includes the naming of the new Yam festival and the performance of the pumpkin leave ceremony. The significance of the feast of the pumpkin leaves includes the following; It serves as a source of social integration and interaction for the community; it is a form of cleansing ceremony for the community. To demonstrate the significance of the ritual sacrifice of Pumpkin leave ceremony, the town crier has to announce it to the people: "GOME GOME GOME GOME ora obodo, Listen! Ezeulu has asked me to announce that the festival of the Pumpkin leaves will take place next coming Nkwo. GOME GOME GOME GOME 'ora obodo! Ezeulu has asked me" ... (64)

The feast of Pumpkin leaves ceremony centers on ancient rite of what scholars have aptly described as pharmakos sequence. The word 'pharmakos' etymologically comes from the Greek word 'pharmakoi' which means expulsion from the community of one or two persons with the express purpose of purifying the city. The pharmakos it must be noted is a member of the community. In most cases, he is deformed, blind or deaf. He is laden with the guilt of the community. At any rate, the pharmakos is guilty and innocent. Thus he is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done. The pharmakos is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilt society. As Frye posits: "The pharmakos is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes. Like the mountaineer whose shout bring down an avalanche. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society or living in world where such injustice are an inescapable part of existence" (1957:41)

The pharmakos is a victim because what has happened to him or her is greater than what he has done to warrant his suffering. In the views of Mannhardt, the pharmakos originally represents a vegetation spirit, while Fraser sees the pharmakos as a representation of the god of vegetation; but Deubner, denies any connection with fertility rites, instead he argues that the pharmakos is a scapegoat, who is laden with all the impurities which has accumulated during the year. This view of Deubner aligns with the position of Akwanya (1998) that the pharmakos is a scoundrel as well as a scapegoat. Of critical importance in this inquiry is that Ezeulu becomes a pharmakos that cleanses the community. We read:

Ugoye who had pushed and shoved until she got to the front murmured her prayer over and over again as part of the circle where she stood: "Great Ulu who kills and saves, implore you to cleanse my household of all defilement. If I have spoken it with my mouth or seen it with my eyes, or if it has heard it with my ears or steeped on it

with my foot or it has come through my children or my friends or kinsfolk let it follow these leaves' she waved the small bunch in a circle round her head and flung it with all her power at the chief priest as he ran past her position (72).

Furthermore, we read of the pharmakos sequence in connection with the planting season. Thus we read: "And what was more the festival of the new Pumpkin leaves would take place in a few days. It was he, Ezeulu, who would then cleanse the six villages of this and countless other sins, before the planting season" (60). The cardinal question is why the cleansing before the planting season? What is the connection between the pharmakos and the planting season. As an agricultural community, the Chief priest has to perform a ritual sacrifice to cleanse the land and its people before planting season. This to some extent agrees with the views of Geoffrey Parrinder:

All over Africa, when the land is tilled and planted, the blessing of the spirits is demanded. Then when the crops is ripe there are most important first fruit ceremonies (not just harvests) of which the essential principle is that the spirits must eat of the fruits before men partake of them. These have been called 'rites of primogeniture' since the spirits, if deprived of their priority in hierarchy, would take revenge by threatening the harvest (1981:83).

This to some extent agrees with the views of some scholars especially those who associate the pharmakos with the vegetation myth. However pharmakos sequence is a consistent pattern of discursive formation in literature. This is evident in several works of art, such as, *Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound*, *Sophocles, Oedipus the King*, Euripides *Iphigenia*, to mention no more. And more recently in Soyinka's *the strong Breed*, *Death and the King Horseman*, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okara's *the Voice* and in the continental Europe in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.

Furthermore, within the context of Africa Traditional Religion, there is this constant dimension of thought that life exists after death. In other words, there is a close knitted relationship between the living and the dead. This belief is evidently seen in certain rituals and sacrifices. As the narrator puts it:

There was one minor feast which Ezeulu's village, Umuachala, celebrated towards the end of the wet season and before the big festival of the year the New Yam Feast. Thus minor celebration was called Akwu Nro. It had little ritual and was no more than a memorial offering by widows to their departed husbands. Every widow in Umuachala prepared foofoo and palm nut soap on the night of Akwu Nro and put it outside her hut. In the morning the bowls were empty because her husband had come up from Ani Mmo and eaten the food (194).

Ritual meals form a constant feature of African society. By way of illustration, the ritual sacrifice of Akwu Nro forms a bond of unity between widows and their departed husband. It is a ritual sacrifice that gives them the opportunity to be re-united with their husband through ritual meal. Commenting on the importance of ritual meal, Dr. A. I. Richards argues:

The ritual meal binds the living and the dead to fulfill their part in the complex scheme of family obligations. It expresses the tie of the child to the father, father to child and that of the man and his relatives. All share in the general sense of rejoicing and delight in the feast of meat, but each is keenly aware by whom the feasts have been provided, according to what scheme they have been divided and what obligations they lay on a particular ancestral group (1932:77).

Conclusion

In view of the above analysis, one may argue strongly that ritual sacrifice forms an indispensable aspect of text formation in *Arrow of God*. To some extent, one is of the view that in absence of ritual sacrifice, the entire argumentative structure of the text collapses. Ritual sacrifice forms the pivot in which the entire structure of the text lies

upon. As a discursive formation, ritual sacrifice is interconnected with the issue that exercise the mind of the characters, touches at the social existence of the society and it controls the social dynamics of the people of community. As a matter of expediency, ritual sacrifice forms the basis of the weave work of the text.

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