

THE CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF MYTH AND RITUAL IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD*

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe, in his creative craftsmanship, deftly employs the medium of mythic/religious symbolism and ritual to navigate the Igbo cultural milieu espoused in his literary masterpiece, Arrow of God. The pre-colonial Igbo society was one steeped in superstition and ancestor worship. This made the Igbo, a very religious people. They were, therefore, subjected to fear, not just fear of the supernatural influence of the gods and their decrees, but also fear of the possible abuse of the existing norms and sanctions by the votaries of these gods against the background of strong religious belief (Nwahunanya, 2008). There is an apparent display of juxtaposition of Christian religion and African traditional religion in the text. The new converts to Christianity are over-zealous, and they flagrantly exhibit outright denigration of the traditional belief system. Hence, Oduche imprisons the royal python in a box and the Christians take their new yams to the church for blessings, instead of waiting for Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu. The thesis I posit, is that Achebe has delineated the mythic symbols, the ritual sequence and the religious dynamics of two warring factions (Christian and Traditional), in his portrayal of the fictive Umuaro community as they grapple with the vicissitudes of living in a momentous cultural milieu.

Introduction

'The study of any mythology is the study of the relevance of the metaphors to a disclosure of the structure and force of the nucleating monad by which every feature of the culture is invested with its spiritual sense. Out of this emerge the forms of art, its tools, and its weapons, ritual forms, musical instruments, social regulations, and ways of relating in war and in peace to its neighbours' (Campbell, 5). In the same vein, Dan Sperber, in *Structuralism and Since: From Levi-Strauss to Derrida* is of the view that 'most cultural phenomena, such as technology or political organization, must submit to a variety of ecological and sociological constraints. Again, myths, which are orally transmitted and culturally selected narratives, tend to ignore any determinations other than intellectual ones, and even these seem to remain relatively loose' (34). Hence, myths should provide an exceptional insight into the spontaneous working of the human mind.

Mythologists long ago established that there are strong resemblances to be found between different myths, and argument has raged as to whether these resemblances reflect common origins, identical stages in cultural evolution, or universal categories of the human mind. Levi-Strauss's contribution has been, first, to show that resemblances are not the only close links to be found between myths, and second, that similarity is one type of systematic relationship between them; inversion is another. Some myths are related to others by differing from them in a systematic way. Sperber further opines that:

Each matrix of meanings refers to another matrix, each myth to other myths. And if it is now asked to what final meaning these mutually significative meanings are referring since in the last resort and in their totality they must refer to something – the only reply to emerge from this study is that myths signify the

mind that evolves them by making use of the world, of which it is, itself a part (36).

The world of the mythology, I would be exploring in this paper is the world of the Igbo in the South Eastern, Nigeria. Of particular interest are the cosmology and the universe of mythology in the fictive Umuaro. In Achebe's creation of the traditional ambience and generation of his father's, or perhaps his grand-father's Ogidi, he weaves the web of myth and ritual to portray the matrix of a people faced with living in a "gilded age".

Defining the phenomenon of myth further, Abanuka conceptualizes myth as "a simple human attempt to explain in symbolic language the origin of the world, human discoveries and inventions, suffering and death, which the community accepts as belonging to it. In so far as mythical language is symbolic, it is simple unpretentious and unsophisticated" (6). The cardinal symbols employed in the narration of myth are those of a supreme Deity, gods and goddesses, and ancestors. In this sense; symbols are the images by which man seeks to express concretely what he thinks about the relationship between the material and immaterial, the visible and invisible aspects of the universe. Therefore, since myth deals with problems of origin, the protagonists or principal agents or principal agents in myths are, depending on the message of the myth, the supreme deity, gods and goddesses, human beings, animals and plants which are given quasi-divine powers in order to produce the effect required by the myth.

The *Encarta English Dictionary* defines myth as "a traditional story about heroes or supernatural beings, often attempting to explain the origins of natural phenomena or aspects of human behaviour. It is also a set of often idealized or glamorized ideas and stories surrounding a particular phenomenon, concept, or famous person while it defines ritual as an established and presented pattern of observance (in a religion), or of actions or procedures in a set, ordered. Ritual on the other hand is defined as an established and prescribed pattern of observance in a religion, or in an ordered and ceremonial way. In a similar vein, Amechi Akwanya, in his espousal of the twin concepts of myth and ritual, posits that "in *Arrow of God*, Idemili means pillar of water and its function is to hold up the rainclouds. It is this function that bears the stress of the name: its reality need not be physical at all" (Akwanya, 1997:108). Achebe as a master story teller, therefore deftly employs the mythic sequence and ritual drama in his portrayal of a traditional community in a moment of colonial domination. He presents a culture that has been disturbed through the imposition of foreign value systems. The novel *Arrow of God* is full of rituals and references to ritual performances either in the past or present occasion.

Textual Analysis

Arrow of God as a literary text is one long ritual drama. The entire text, from the beginning to the end of the narrative is a rendition of ritual performances. The novel is full of rituals and references to rituals either in the past or present context. Even in the ritual processes in the Umuaro community, there are politics and dynamics playing out. When Oduche imprisons the sacred python, Eze Idemili, on the instigation of Nwaka sends an insulting message to Ezeulu, just to make a mockery of him and his son's act of reckless indiscretion.

Ezeulu's exile in prison is an inversion of the myth of the sojourner who goes into exile and comes back with bounty. In Ezeulu's case, his return from incarceration by the white colonialists spells doom and destruction for his community. Ezeulu's violation of certain rituals and his resistance

to amend the ritual of the eating of the sacred yams are the events that inevitably lead to his ultimate tragedy. The ritual change eventually comes despite his resistance. The church in its ritualistic performance of the New Yam Harvest and Thanksgiving catches in on the situation and gives the people the necessary spiritual protection that Ezeulu in his traditional ritual has failed to offer them.

The opening passage of the novel shows one of those rituals being performed with Ezeulu peering into the sky, so as to announce the appearance of the new moon. Ezeulu is first presented to us as a nameless character. His personality is subsumed in the deity, Ulu. He is simply the chief priest of Ulu. In other words, he has no essence of his own, except in Ulu. Little or no wonder then that at the end of the novel, his tragedy is the tragedy of Ulu and vice versa. Ezeulu as a priest, sees himself in the role of an arrow aimed by his god for the service of the community. He is required to perform rituals and ceremonies pertaining to the new moon, new yam, and the festival of pumpkin leaves; for the appropriation and remission of the sins of the people. He in effect is a kind of sacrificial lamb and a scape goat. He is also a carrier of the sins of his people. Chibuzo Onunkwo in his "Ritual Sacrifice in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*" says that "the feast of Pumpkin leaves ceremony centers on an ancient rite of what scholars have aptly described as pharmakos sequence". The word pharmakos, he further explains comes from the Greek word 'pharmakoi' – meaning expulsion. So, in effect, it connotes the expulsion of the individual from the community for the purpose of purifying the community (195). It does appear however, that Ezeulu carries his responsibility as the priest of Ulu too far. He sees himself as the 'bow and the arrow'.

The beginning of the narrative already heralds the end. From the start of the novel, the ending is already foreshadowed. The story begins with a ritual and ends with a ritual. The very first sentence of the novel tells us of Ezeulu peering at the sky in search of the new moon. This ritual is performed by Ezeulu at exactly the same time, every month. It is his cardinal responsibility as the chief priest of Ulu, the most important deity in Umuaro, to announce the sighting of the new moon by sounding his metal gong (ogene), he then goes ahead to eat one of the twelve sacred yams; each representing a month of the year. However, the ultimate tragedy of the novel is already foregrounded in the opening page of the text, since it is in his defiance of performing this ritual later, that he is destroyed. The moon Ezeulu sights is described as being "as thin as an orphan fed grudgingly by a cruel foster-mother" (1). Ugoye, Ezeulu's youngest wife also complains to Matefi, her co-wife that the moon "sits awkwardly – like an evil moon" (2). The evil moon sighted at the beginning of the novel heralds the evil that will subsume the protagonist, Ezeulu at the very end of the novel. The long ritual narrative ends with the chief priest failing to perform the most important ritual which the cultural tradition demands of him, and he is destroyed in the aftermath.

The announcement of the appearance of the new moon and the eating of the sacred yams, that will in turn herald the new yam festival and harvesting of yams are ritual performances. They are also deeply embedded in mythological roots. Every household in Umuaro has its own shrine where the family's ancestors are worshipped. Every full grown man equally has his personal Ofo, Ikenga, and Okposi. There is a flamboyant and elaborate display of a ritual performance as Ezeulu does the sacred acts pertaining to the arrival of the new moon:

Ezeulu rose from his goatskin and moved to the household shrine on a flat board behind the central dwarf wall at the entrance. His Ikenga, about as tall as a man's forearm, its animal horn as long as tall as the rest of its human body, jostle with faceless Okposi of the ancestors black with the blood of sacrifice, and

his short personal staff of ofo. Nwafor's eyes picked out the special Okposi which belong to him (6).

Obika, Ezeulu's son, on a particular night, while returning home very late, meets a strange being. The night being a rainy one, with flashes of lightening, and clasps of thunder, Obika runs into his father's Obi as frightened as a little child. He describes the being he saw, saying that it looked like a wealthy man, with an eagle's feather on his red cap, and wielding a big tusk on his shoulder. His father tells him not to be afraid, because it was Eru, the magnificent, the one that gives wealth to those who find favour with him, that he saw.

Ezeulu praised the god, so much that one would imagine that he was the proud priest of Eru, the god of wealth rather Ulu who stood above Eru and all the other deities. When he[Eru] likes a man, wealth flows like a river into his house; his yams grow as big as human beings, his goats produce threes and his hens hatch nines. (9).

The Mythic Relevance of Ulu

The history behind the making of Ulu is a very interesting one. There is the myth that the deity, Ulu founded the six villages that make up Umuaro. Ezeulu narrates how a common deity was made for all the six villages, by strong medicine men to help the people fight Abam warriors whenever they invaded. It was said that things became very difficult for the six villages, so their leaders came together to save themselves. 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 became mmili Ulu. The six villages then took the name of Umuaro, and the priest of Ulu became chief priest. From that day they were never again beaten by an enemy (15). Achebe in his characteristic dexterity as a master story teller describes it mesmerizingly in the following manner,

In the very distant past, when lizards were still few and far between the six villages – Umuachala, Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezeani, Umuogwuwu and Umuisiuzo – lived as different peoples, and each worshipped its own deity. Then the hired soldiers of Abam used to strike in the dead of night, set fire to the houses and carry men, women and children into slavery. 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 became mili Ulu. The six villages then took the name of Umuaro, and the priest of Ulu became their chief priest. (14-15).

People made deities to be of help to them and to be a succor in turbulent and perilous times. Akukalia in his praise of his mother's people, the people of Okperi says: "At first Eke was a very small market. Other markets in the neighbourhood were drawing it dry. Then one day, the men of Okperi made a powerful deity and placed their market in its care. From that day Eke grew and grew until it became the biggest market in these parts. This deity called Nwanyieke is represented as an old woman. Every eke market day before cock-crow, she appears in the market place with a broom in her

right hand and dances round the vast open space beckoning with her broom in all directions of the earth and drawing folk from every land. People never came near the market before cockcrow because if they did they would see the ancient lady in the task.

One of Akukalia's companions on their way to deliver a message to the people of Okperi, insists that the Umuru people have a more powerful deity that has turned their nkwo market, beside the great river into an international market. Akukalia believes that the old woman of the market has swept the world with her broom, even the land of the white men where they say the sun never shines (19). The people of the community believe that rituals must have been performed to attract different peoples to the eke market, hence the transformation from a village market to an international market.

There is a prodigious use of the ritual symbols in the portrayal of the marriage rites and the subsequent sacrifices after Obika marries his wife, Okuata. Immediately after the marriage feast, the mother of the bride, her sisters, friends, relatives, "and all the protecting company from her village set out for home again leaving her behind" (117). Thereafter, a medicine-man cum diviner is hired to perform some rituals and sacrifices as custom demands. Here is an elaborate depiction of a ritual performance as Obika's bride, Okuata is led to a road junction to make sacrifices to cleanse and purify her from any evil, she may have contaminated in her life as a spinster. She is expected to enter into her husband's house in a purified state, which is devoid of any evil, impurities, curses, spell, and enchantments. The medicine man that was engaged to perform the marital rituals however appears to be greedy, since instead of burying the chicken along with the other ritual items, decides to take it home.

Rituals play a prominent role in the daily life of Umuaro people. This is eloquently displayed in a minor celebration known as *Akwu Nro*; this ceremony has some forms of ritual attached to its celebration. There are rituals performed by all the six villages of Umuaro, collectively, and some performed by each village, individually. The *Akwu Nro* is one of the latter. "Every widow in Umuachala is expected to prepare foofoo and palmtree soup on the night of *Akwu Nro* and put it outside her hut. In the morning the bowls are usually found to be empty because her husband had come up from Ani-Mmo and eaten the food. This ritual is described as a memorial offering by widows in commemoration of their departed husbands. All these ritual performances go a long way to fore-ground the relationship between African gods and Africans in their interrelatedness in African cosmology. As I have postulated in an essay on Achebe's work, some of the deities the people believe in include, the goddess of the earth 'Ani', which is in charge of fertility, the goddess of the sky and thunder bolt, 'Amadiora', and the pillar of water, 'Idemili', whose totem is the sacred python" (Okoye-Ugwu, 2013).

Another interesting aspect of myths is the usual presence of totems. Totemism has been variously defined and classified by many scholars and critics. Dan Sperber opines that, animals appear both systematic and quite open-ended. Levi Strauss' account of totemism is based on certain psychological assumptions. The Ikenga totem is revered in the Igbo cosmological world and even in the fictive milieu of the world of Umuaro and Okperi. Captain Winterbottom gives a notable definition of Ikenga. In his own words: "Ikenga is the most important fetish in the Igbo man's arsenal, so to speak. It represents his ancestors to whom he must make daily sacrifices (41).

The Ikenga totem, is the strength of a man's right arm. It signifies a man's life and his ancestral lineage. It is therefore an abomination and a mortal sin, for Akukalia in a fit of violent rage, to break Ebo's Ikenga into two pieces. It means that Ebo has been left a living dead. Even the Umuaro

people who sent Akukalia as an emissary to Okperi land, condemned his action roundly. They absolve Ebo of any blame for killing Akukalia. They bemuse and wonder: "let us put ourselves in the place of the man he [Akukalia] made a corpse before his own eyes. Who would bear such a thing? What propitiation or sacrifice would atone for such sacrilege? How would the victim set about putting himself right again with his fathers unless he could say to them: rest, for the man that did it has paid with his head? The Ikenga is a sacred totem and is never left to be ridiculed, let alone, destroyed. It is a very important totem in the life of an Igbo man. It represents a man's ancestors to whom he makes daily sacrifice. When he dies, it is split in two; one half is buried with him and the other half is thrown away.

Also of utmost importance to the Umuaro community is the indefatigable royal python totem. The 'Eke Idemili' is so revered and accorded so much dignity, that even if it is inadvertently killed by a person, such a person accords it a funeral as elaborate as the funeral of a titled chief in the community. The Eze Idemili usually issues the person, a list of items to provide for a befitting burial and funeral to be accorded the slain royal python. For a person that kills it advertently, there is usually a stiffer penalty. The royal python sometimes glides into people's houses and children engage in plays with it. It glides unhurriedly in its royalty and splendor, so much so, that it is an act of abomination for anyone to kill it.

However, with the coming of the white missionaries with the Christian religion, some of the things held sacred by the traditional community are desecrated. Some of the people convert from the Igbo traditional religion to Christian religion and also decide to make a public show of their conversion and seeming repentance by ridiculing and debasing the totems that are held sacred and revered. One of such people is Ezeulu's youthful son, Oduche. The young boy Oduche not being courageous enough to kill the python decides to demystify it, by ruffling its feathers by imprisoning it in a box. Moses Unachukwu, a new convert, who is from the "village which carried the priesthood of Idemili, knew perhaps more than others what the python was" (48). He deploys his knowledge of Bible and the myth and traditions of his people, Umuaro to enlighten the zealous, missionary Mr. Goodcountry on the history of the sacred python. He lashes out that:

One day six brothers of Umuama killed the python and asked one of their number, Iweka, to cook yam pottage with it. Each of them brought a piece of yam and a bowl of water to Iweka. When he finished cooking the yam pottage the men came one by one and took their pieces of yam. Then they began to fill their bowls to the mark with the yam stew. But this time only four of them took their measure before the stew got finished. The brother began to quarrel violently, and then to fight very soon the fighting spread throughout Umuama and so fierce was it that the village was almost wiped out. The few survivors fled their village, across the great river to the land of Olu where they are scattered today. The remaining six villages seeing what had happened to Umuama, went to a seer to know the reason, and he told them that the royal python was sacred to Idemili; it was this deity which had punished Umuama. From that day, the six villages decreed that henceforth anyone who killed the python would be regarded as having killed his kinsman (48).

Consequently, when Oduche, Ezeulu's son due to his religious zeal, imprisons the royal python in his box, there is outright condemnation by Umuaro people, even within Ezeulu's

household, the outpouring of emotions are made manifest. Oduche's mother is so embittered that during the festival of the pumpkin leaves, she takes the ceremony personally. She vigorously stamps her feet on the leaves after saying all her sins and those of her children particularly Oduche, and heaping them on the pumpkin leaves.

Ezeulu is not satisfied with the humble status of being a "watchman", like the child in Achebe's analogy as the owner of a goat. Very early in the novel, we begin to see the ambitious side to his character, especially as he wants to resolve the ambiguity to his own advantage. To Ezeulu, all power should be fully delegated to him. Recognizing the vulnerability of his enviable position, he wants no half-measures since he has deep-seated fears that with his enemies around, opposition may arise and exploit the loopholes that exist in the constitutional basis of his authority to undermine him (Nwahunanya, 175).

The Figure of the Mask

Simon Gikandi is of the view that as a metaphor and paradigm, the mask is often used in *Arrow of God* to express the tension between tradition and transformation. Ezeulu justifies his decision to send one of his sons to the colonial school by evoking the figure of the mask: 'the world is like mask dancing', he says. 'If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place. Here, Ezeulu is not merely using the mask metaphor to rationalize his decision to hedge his bets on the meaning of the future; he is also, perhaps unconsciously expressing his own doubts about the survival of his culture in the face of the colonial challenge. Ezeulu as the priest of Ulu is supposed to be the guardian of the past and the rituals that represent it, and thus the guarantor of continuity. By citing a traditional metaphor of the mask, he is able to express his desire for cultural transformation and to mask this desire at the same time (1991:53).

The figure of the mask also plays out where Ezeulu describes himself this way: 'I am known and at the same time I am unknowable (132). This is because of his duality as spirit and man. Gikandi rightly observes that, "through the representation of Ezeulu as a mask, Achebe has created two paradigms which are crucial to his narrative strategies and ideologies – the masks as the depository of essential values and as a figure of duplicity (1991:55). However, beyond Gikandi's argument, it is to be noted that Ezeulu is caught up in overreaching himself by appropriating the quality of the Almighty God. The grand standing of the priest of Ulu is so palpable that it can only but foreshadows the calamity that befalls him at the end of the novel. Ezeulu's two sons – Edogo and Obika are equally in interplay with the mask; the former as the mask carver, the latter as the wearer of the mask (Ogbazuluobodo masquerade).

Levi-Strauss believes that the human mind is able and liable to impose a specific kind of organization on its representation of the world. He assumes that the structure of such symbolic systems as totemic classification is determined by a universal human ability. He goes on to say that symbolic animals are chosen not because they are 'good to eat', but because they are 'good to think' they are in fact, food for thought. Therefore, since cultural symbols such as totems are food for thought, their study offers us a new approach to the study of cultural dynamics. Ezeulu serves as a figure of duplicity. There is in fact, duality in the personality of Ulu's priest. He serves two functions; as man and as spirit. He says this of himself in the novel: I am known and at the same time I am unknowable (132). This runs through the entire text because Ezeulu's close associates, friends, family

and even the entire community, most times, find him unfathomable and an enigma. He sometimes acts and talks in inexplicable ways.

At the very beginning of the novel, we find Ezeulu as he indulges in a metaphysical analysis of his supposed power, which on closer examination appears to be actually non-existent. The epicenter of Ezeulu's priestly nexus, is the annual ritual of the pumpkin leaves where Ezeulu performs the purification rite of passage of sins, as all Umuaro women symbolically hurl at him the evils and misfortunes of their households in the form of the pumpkin leaves for burial at the shrine of Ulu. Ezeulu's physical appearance; his regalia and mode of dressing when he appears at the market place, to enact the ritual of the festival of pumpkin leaves, shows his half spirit, half man nature. It is presented like this:

He wore smoked raffia which descended from his waist to the knee. The left half of his body – from forehead to toes – was painted with white chalk. Around his head was a leather band from which an eagle's feather pointed backwards. On his right hand he carried Nne Ofo, the mother of all staffs of authority in Umuaro, and in his left he held a long iron staff which kept up a quivering rattle whenever he struck its pointed end into the earth.... Then he ran forward again as though he had seen a comrade in the vacant air.... And those who were near enough heard the knocking together of Ezeulu's staff and another which no one saw. At this, many fled in terror before the priest and the unseen presences around him (70).

However, the one thing Ezeulu loses sight of is the fact that the six villages all came together to appoint the first Ezeulu, his grandfather, the carrier of the deity, Ulu. His seeming power is a mandate given by the people. This means that without the people behind him, he is standing alone; powerless. Ogbuefi Nwaka, even though he is one of Ezeulu's detractors rightly says:

Yes, it was right that the chief priest should go ahead and confront danger before it reached his people. that was the responsibility of his priesthood. It had been like that from the first day when the six harassed villages got together and said to Ezeulu's ancestor: you will carry this deity for us. At first he was afraid. What power had he in his body, to carry such potent danger? But his people sang their support behind him and the flute man turned his head. So he went down on both knees and they put the deity on his head. He rose up and was transformed into a spirit. His people kept up their song behind him and he stepped forward on his first and decisive journey, compelling even the four days in the sky to give way to him (189).

This ritual enactment of how Ezeulu's grandfather was chosen by the people to be the chief priest of Ulu, clearly depicts the truism that no man wins an argument against his people. It is sheer determinacy on the part of Umuaro, that they selected the family to carry the great deity, Ulu. Ezeulu therefore cannot rise above the decree that enacted him into the office of chief priest. His refusal to eat the sacred yams is the catalyst that triggered a chain of reactions that finally snowballed into his demystification and eventual destruction. The ritual of the Ogbazulobodo masquerade performing and running through the entire villages with the speed of light as one of the funeral ceremonies during the burial of a prominent man in the community is what finally sounds the death knell on Ezeulu's coffin.

His favourite son, Obika despite the fact that he is down with fever, decides to assist the bereaved family by performing as the Ogbazuluobodo, dies tragically in the process.

Conclusion

Achebe aptly, yet subtly uses the rich resources of myth, legend, ritual, and cultural history to accentuate the story of the sacred royal python which is very much revered and accorded immense dignifying respect. In the novel, Moses Unachukwu advocates caution with respect to the treatment meted to the royal python, as against Mr Goodcountry's instruction that the newly converted Christians should kill it anywhere it is sighted. Due to the exalted priestly office of Ezeulu, most times, he speaks the truth in spite of daunting opposing forces. In the land dispute between Umuaro and Okperi, he is the lone speaker of truth. Some of his adversaries interpreted it to be because his mother was from Okperi. However, there are other men of Umuaro whose mothers came from Okperi, like Akukalia, who carried the war to Okperi, yet those men perverted the course of justice.

Consequent on Ezeulu's attempt to present the truth as he sees it, the white administration finds him a veritable tool for warrant chieftaincy. He rejects the offer while insisting that Ezeulu will be no body's chief but Ulu. Since, he is already cast as half spirit, half man, he believes, that his office is too sacrosanct and sacred to be tinted with mundane, physical administration of the white infiltrators. This however, is a very expensive price to pay, as it leaves him at war with the white administration on the one side, his Umuaro people, on the other. In their exposition of this case in point, Akwanya and Anohu posit that:

[the] reason Ezeulu and the white man cannot agree is that while the white man wishes to make use of him to further his own aims and to achieve control over the tradition-bound community, Ezeulu sees the white man's system as a manifestation across his and Ulu's path. His priesthood is constituted for a specific mode of leadership: to make the journey into the unknown on behalf of Umuaro, creating a path for them where there was none before. The responsibility of his priesthood is what has exercised him all along. In the process he unmask the white man, the masked spirit of the day, as would become the bearer of the heritage of the first Ezeulu, whose debut with his deity involves the unmasking and defeat of monster figures. But it is as if this last effort has fatally exhausted Ezeulu and his priesthood, perhaps the deity too. (2001:57).

With this scenario playing out, Ezeulu unwittingly plays into the hands of his bitterest enemies. It must be noted that Ezeulu's name confronts the reader immediately as half man, half spirit. Towards the end of the novel, when Obika carries the Ogbazuluobodo masquerade, he immediately assumes the quality of a spirit. He, in effect, becomes half man, half spirit like his father. Whenever he sees light, he screams, "ewoo oku o ewoo oku o", because he does not want his physical form to be seen. Even though Obika is down with intense fever, he continues to run around the town extremely fast and dexterously, until he arrives at the masquerade house and removes the regalia, he then falls down and dies, because he has once more assumed his physical personality.

The accidental death of Obika is the final catastrophe that Ezeulu finds extremely difficult to bear. He wonders why Ulu has chosen to deal ruthlessly with him. The chief priest of Ulu is so distraught that he demands to know why a man should send his son to bring fire from a neighbour's

hut and then unleash rain on him. *Arrow of God* is an enactment of ritual drama in prose form (Dan Izevbaye, 2014). Ezeulu becomes a sacrificial lamb, and a scape goat. Towards the end of the novel, we are confronted with a demented and broken Ezeulu. The resolution of the mythic sequence in *Arrow of God* is embedded in the ironic twist in the workings of Ulu, and its bizarre abandonment of its priest at a cross road; like in Ogbuefi Ofoka's remark that "a priest like Ezeulu leads a god to ruin himself and in Akuebue's remark that "a god like Ulu leads a priest to ruin himself" (213). Their destinies are irretrievably woven together, and one cannot fall without dragging the other with him.

Arrow of God ends with a series of paradoxes. The missionary priest, Mr Goodcountry organizes a church harvest, a de facto New Yam Festival, where prominent Umuaro men and ozo title holders sent their sons with a tuber of yam or two. "Thereafter any yam in the man's field was harvested in the name of the son" (230). However, Ulu chose a very bad time to admonish its priest; for in destroying Ezeulu, it also destroyed itself. The entire narrative that begins with a ritual finally ends with a ritual. The pessimism seen in the beginning ritual, where an evil moon is sighted, portending gloom for the people is what is seen at the end of the story. The failure of Ezeulu to perform the needed ritual due to anger or pride, or both, leaves him in a state of schizophrenic delirium that is worse than death.

Lament of the Sacred Python

I was there when lizards were ones and twos, child

Of sacred father Idemili. Painful

Tear-drops of sky's first weeping

Drew my spots. Sky-born

I walked the earth with royal gait

And crowds of human mourners

Filing down funeralpaths

Across lengthening shadows

Of the dead acknowledged my face

In broken dirges of fear.

But of late

A wandering god pursued,

It seems, by hideous things

He did at home has come to us

And pitched his tent here

Beneath the people's holy tree

And hoisted from its pinnacle

A charlatan bell that calls

Unknown monotonous to revolts,

Scandals, and false immunities

And I that none before could meet except

In fear though I brought no terrors

From creation's day of gifts I must now

Turn on my track.

In dishonourable flight

Where children stop their play
 To shriek in my ringing ears:
 Look out, python! Look out, python!
 Christians relish python flesh!

(Achebe, *Beware Soul Brother*)

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