Achebe's Arrow of God: The Kinetic Idiom of an Unmasking

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Abstract
The various levels of rhythm in Achebe's fiction, from stylistic to structural and thematic, have been explored before this. My project is a related one: it is to focus on the human body as a verbal signifier that encodes movement iconographically as a condition of culture. The complex kinetics of Arrow of God relates directly to a theory of action, from which develops a hermeneutic practice: reading as a dance of attitudes, criticism as participation. I begin by looking at certain key moments in the fictive 'history' of the body: the moment when the eye coincides with the knee; the moment of awkwardly sitting; the symbolic moment of decapitation; etc. And I move toward a discussion of masking and motion — for the critical context of posture and gesture is the dance, where we modify our attitudes as we partake in the resculpting and renewal of our symbolic selves, constantly, from one moment to the next — moving from frame to frame in the cross-rhythmic overlap of solo-and-circle.
The Igbo world is an arena for the interplay of forces. It is a dynamic world of movement and flux. Igbo art, reflecting this world-view, is less tranquil than mobile and active, even aggressive.

It is the need and the striving to come to terms with a multitude of forces and demands which give Igbo life its tense and restless dynamism and its art an outward, social and kinetic quality.

(Chinua Achebe, 'The Igbo World and Its Art')

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I am opposed to the Eurocentric appropriation of Achebe’s ‘canon’ for the metropolitan ‘Great Tradition’ and my purpose is to consider in detail the counter assertion, often announced but rarely argued on the evidence. If this is a truly decolonising fiction, the case cannot be argued simply at the level of content (by authenticating social setting, folklore, the use of proverbs, etc.); meaning needs to be explored in terms of
mode. My interest is in the attitudes of the image, the strategies of the narrative, the placing of the reader, the cultural coding of those aesthetic principles that inform the whole process of the fiction.

When Ezeulu, Chief Priest of Ulu, decides to send Oduche to learn the ways of the whiteman it is an extension of himself, saying: 'I want one of my sons to ... be my eye there.' But it is also as a sacrifice:

it may even happen to an unfortunate generation that they are pushed beyond the end of things, and their back is broken and hung over a fire. When this happens they may sacrifice their own blood. This is what our sages meant when they said that a man who has nowhere else to put his hand for support puts it on his own knee.

Oduche is not only the eye; he is also the knee. But it is not only vision and sacrifice that are linked in the duality of Ezeulu's motive for sending his son to join the whiteman: the eye is to see, so that he may know the secret of the whiteman's power, and the knee is to lend support to the arm put upon it in order to stabilize a collective body on the brink of collapse. The connection between the two is inescapable. The knowledge that is to come from what the eye sees and to stabilize the traditional power-base of the villages of Umuaro is correlated with a physical gesture, and that is aimed at maintaining the vertical position and balance of the body under the severe stress of imperialism.

I have had occasion elsewhere to refer to the West African tradition of cultivating divinity through a tradition of personal balance; here two further tenets of the associated ideology are relevant. First is the importance of 'straightness', in the context of normative stability of stance, traditionally correlated with social well-being. Second, stability is extended in significance through its various modes, the important one for our purposes being that of 'supporting'. The broken body that maintains 'straightness' by putting hand upon knee presents itself in terms of an indigenous mode of thought (directly associated with the eye). At the end of the novel this helps to explain why it is 'not simply the blow of Obika's death' (229) that drives Ezeulu insane. It is Oduche who, failing to report what he sees of the whiteman (in effect blinding Ezeulu), becomes the 'lizard that ruined his mother's funeral' (221), an image of betrayal that is apt for its horizontal nature: the leg has given way, and the priest balances precariously on the brink of 'the collapse and ruin of all things'. He 'stood where he was' (221), without resolution and as though one-legged, for one more blow will put him totally off balance. With Obika's death, he 'sank to the ground', in an attitude of body which expresses an ironically 'haughty splendour', that of 'the demented high priest' (229, my italics).
Many critics have pointed to the moral ‘no man however great was greater than his people’ (230). Ezeulu is accused explicitly of being ‘a man of ambition, he wants to be king, priest, diviner, all’ (27). Such ambition runs in the family, for Ezeulu’s own father had to be shown ‘that Igbo people knew no kings’ (27). His mother, on the other hand, had a tendency to madness at the new moon, on which occasion her feet would be put in stocks. No wonder, then, that Ezeulu retains throughout his life a fear of the new moon, that while part of him rejoices in the haughty splendour of his high office another part (fear) ‘lay on the ground in the grip of joy’ (2). It is an image that relates obviously to his mother. But the awkward seating of the new moon at the beginning of the novel is not only linked with Ezeulu’s personally inherited potential for instability through the image of his mother in stocks. It is also ominous with regard to the whiteman.

When we first meet Tony Clarke, the new Assistant District Officer, he is reading an inspired rendition of the call of Empire in ‘The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger’ (the imperialist fiction that Things Fall Apart internally defines itself against). But we are immediately taken back a little in time, so that we may see him seated ‘uneasily on the edge of a chair’ (34). Unfamiliar with colonial etiquette, he has arrived too early to His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor’s dinner and has been kept waiting nervously in the Reception Hall. This is not the only time we see him awkwardly seated. His ‘worst moment’ comes when he enters the Dining Room and finds that no place has been allocated for him: ‘After what looked to Clarke like hours the A.D.C. noticed him and sent one of the stewards to get a chair. Then he must have had second thoughts, for he stood up and offered his own place to Clarke’ (34). Rather than an isolated incident, this is a symbolic anticipation of the role Clarke awkwardly plays in the novel when he sits in the ‘seat’ temporarily abdicated by Winterbottom (a name suggesting all manner of discomforts).

No doubt the whiteman’s postures and physical attitudes have generally connoted awkwardness for the African, whose cultural kinetics is rooted in the stylized iconography of the dance rather than yielding to uncritical naturalistic assumptions. Achebe relies upon his reader to make this connection with the whiteman when he writes, in ‘Beware, Soul Brother’, of those ‘others ... lying in wait leaden-footed, tone deaf’. And the same iconography of awkwardness runs through Arrow of God as a motif. If the omen of the new moon that ‘sits awkwardly ... like an evil moon’ (2) refers as much to the whiteman as to Ezeulu’s mother in stocks — as a type of his own potential instability — then the threat to tradi-
tional society, as it was in *Things Fall Apart*, is both internal and external.

It is change, in the form of the whiteman, that poses the external threat. ‘The world is changing,’ Ezeulu tells Oduche. ‘I do not like it. But I am like the bird Eneke-nti-oba. When his friends asked him why he was always on the wing he replied: «Men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching»’ (45). This is Ezeulu’s explanation of why he wants Oduche to be his eye. Of particular interest is the concept associated with Oduche-the-eye of adjusting to change by being constantly on the move; for, at the same time, the response to change that is embodied in Oduche-the-leg (upon which the hand seeks support) is the *arrest* of motion. This latter response is ritualized in the sacrifice of Oduche, while the ritual counterpart of the former is the dance: ‘If anyone asks you why you should be sent to learn these new things tell him that a man must dance the dance prevalent in his time’ (189). The attitude to change, then, is a complex one, of neutralizing it by embracing it, or of arresting it by making sacrifice to the god that is bringing it about. Dance bridges the poles of opposition embodied in this complexity of response to change.

If the image for responding to change by moving with it is the dancer, it must be admitted that the significant point, flexibility, focuses to a great degree on the legs. Peggy Harper writes: ‘A characteristic body posture in [Nigerian] dance consists of a straight-backed torso with the legs used as springs, the knees bending and stretching in fluidly executing the rhythmic action patterns of the dance, and feet placed firmly on the ground.’ The hand which seeks body-support upon the leg, then, implies the arrest of motion; not only is this ‘logical’, it refers as well to the traditional principle of ‘supporting’ as a stabilizing mode. This particular ‘supporting’ image requires the leg to bend, to provide a plane against which the hand can push, in order to gain the vertical impulse of stability. This seems obvious and pedantic perhaps; but it is worth stressing that the ultimate intention is ‘straightness’, so that, although motion is arrested, the image is underlined by an active potentiality — straightening. The iconography of the bended knee in sculpture often suggests the same context. The implication, centring on the knee, is of flexibility — which moves us considerably closer to the image of the dancer than the apparent contradiction in Ezeulu’s responses to change might at first suggest. Although the African ideal of stability is generally vested in a flat-footed approach to the dance, and embodied in performance by a straight-backed torso, the complementary ideal of flexibility relies upon bended ‘buoyant knees over stable feet’ (*African Art in Motion*, 10). As the image of the dancer and the image of the ‘supporting’ knee are seen to
merge, so do the respective associated poles of Ezeulu's apparently contradictory responses to change, in accord with the traditional dance dialectic relating flexibility to stability.

In sending Oduche to learn the whiteman's ways, Ezeulu bases his response to change upon the principle of flexibility, or, in other words, *innovation*; but the principle behind sacrificing the boy to the whiteman's god is one of stability, or *tradition*. One might even see the two responses as relating to two different perceptions of time, 'real' and 'mythic', the one permitting individual innovation and the other sacrificing the individual to the tradition of community. If this is so then we should not wonder that the image of the dancer and the image of the 'supporting' knee are not so polarised as Ezeulu's responses to change at first seem: as 'real' and 'mythic' time mesh. Positive proof of this is given in the form of call-and-response (and solo-and-circle), which provides a potent organisational metaphor throughout the novel. As Thompson writes, there is an 'overlap situation' in call-and-response that

combines innovative calls (or innovative steps, of the leader) with tradition (the choral round, by definition blurring individuality). Solo-ensemble work, among the many other things it seems to accomplish, is the presentation of the individual as a figure on the ground of custom. It is the very perception of real and mythic time.

(*African Art in Motion*, 43)

That Oduche is sent to the whiteman as both a sacrifice and 'to learn a new dance' (169) in fact suggests the mesh of tradition and innovation that is at the core of Ezeulu's response to the threat of the whiteman. This becomes most apparent when he makes use of the whiteman's attitude to time, an attitude expressed first by keeping the Priest waiting (as Clarke himself had been kept waiting while being 'broken in' at the Lieutenant-Governor's dinner) and then by imprisoning him. Imprisonment and other forms of coercive waiting enslave one to a future that makes the present meaningless — as Camus, Beckett and other Absurdists have demonstrated. But Ezeulu attempts to exploit the temporal condition of meaningless imprisonment (a symbolic condition of Western life, tyrannised as it is by imperial structure) so as to manipulate the traditional year of people, in revenge for their disrespect: 'his real struggle was with his own people and the white man was, without knowing it, his ally. The longer he was kept in Okperi the greater his grievance and his resources for the fight' (176). The whiteman, of course, is *not* his ally, and so in the end he fails (and falls).

If one is to move with the rhythm of change as the dancer to the drum,
one must contribute one's own rhythm and not merely mark time. This, in effect, is what Ezeulu asks of Oduche:

It was I who sent you to join those people because of my friendship to the white man, Wintabota. He asked me to send one of my children to learn the ways of his people and I agreed to send you. I did not send you so that you might leave your duty in my household. Do you hear me? Go and tell the people who choose you to go to Okperi that I said no. Tell them that tomorrow is the day on which my sons and my wives and my son's wife work for me. Your people should know the custom of this land; if they don't you must tell them. Do you hear me? (14-15)

To say that innovation and tradition mesh in the overall motivation for sending Oduche to the whiteman is another way of saying that he is expected 'to learn a new dance' while maintaining in his mind the rhythm of the old. In other words, what Ezeulu requires of him is conceived by Achebe in the same terms as 'apart-playing': in the terms of cross-rhythmic interpretation. Oduche is to learn the ways of the whiteman without losing his commitment to the ways of his people. Unfortunately, however, the rhythm of the whiteman is not merely different in kind. The Western 'approach to rhythm is called divisive because we divide the music into standard units of time', Chernoff tells us:

As we mark the time by tapping a foot or clapping our hands, we are separating the music into easily comprehensible units of time.... It is this fact, that Western musicians count together from the same starting point, which enables a conductor to stand in front of more than a hundred men and women playing in an orchestra and keep them together with his baton. Rhythm is something we follow...

(African Rhythm and African Sensibility, 41-42)

Accordingly, Oduche is unable to cross the rhythm of the 'new dance' with the rhythm of his people; instead, he takes it on its own terms, and follows it. The next time we come across Oduche, after his father's command to tell the whiteman the old custom even as he learns the new, we see him instead 'speak up for the Lord' (49) against the Sacred Python — following instead of interpreting. The irony of his subsequent Christian naming (an imperial act of claiming), as the rock upon which the Church will be built, is that it is an image of solid inflexibility totally alien to African notions of support and stability. This anticipation of the Christian baptism of Oduche as Peter, being conceived in terms of a rejection of the traditional modes of stability, also prefigures the final collapse of Ezeulu when his son pulls his leg out from underneath him. Tradition and innovation, integrated in the dual symbolism of Oduche's
role, become mutually exclusive when the father 'cannot count on' the son (221). Innovation triumphs, tradition collapses; and the Church offers sanctuary to those who wish 'to escape the vengeance of Ulu' (220).

The subsequent loss of vitality (in the socially symbolic sense of Achebe's next novel, *A Man of the People*) is suggested not only by the inability of Ulu's priest to remain standing, but at the same time by his failure to maintain a 'cool' face, a mask to match his grief: 'For did they not say that a man is like a funeral ram which must take whatever beating comes to it without opening its mouth; that the silent tremor of pain down its body alone must tell of its suffering?' (229). A traditional focal point of idealised stance, as an icon of vitality, is the 'cool' head, expressive in its inexpressiveness. Oduche’s betrayal not only links him (as a lizard) with his father's sinking to the ground: Ezeulu's 'utter amazement', such that he 'hid his face on Obika's chest' and heard no explanation of the death (229), also looks back upon his recognition of Oduche as the eye that does not see: 'I sent you to see and hear for me. I did not know at that time I was sending a goat's skull' (220).

The failure of the Chief Priest to 'cool' his grief by putting on the face of unexpected mental balance brings us to another of the novel's organizing principles that are grounded upon the traditional aesthetics of dance — that is the principle of the mask. Jonathan A. Peters, referring rather obliquely to 'Achebe's mask idiom', writes:

> the characters in *Arrow of God* may be seen as masks involved in a bizarre masquerade within Umuaro, within the British administration and in contacts between the two.... As a result, the pageant of masks looks different to the characters on different levels and only the reader, through Achebe's ministrations, can see the often tragic implications on all these levels.

Without disagreeing, it must be admitted that Peters's discussion of the novel does little to provide evidence of this assertion's truth. He draws our attention to the various explicit instances of a mask in the narrative, such as during the Festival of Pumpkin Leaves. He points out that Achebe's language is enriched by a number of metaphorical allusions to masks, again explicit. But there is no attempt to connect the actual appearances of masks with the allusions made to them. Although Peters does convince his reader, somewhat impressionistically, that the question of power in the novel is related to the presence of masks, his insights are for the most part isolated and undeveloped. It may be true that Ezeulu 'develops the strategy of masking his personal decisions and aims behind the divine will of Ulu' (*A Dance of Masks*, 120), but what does this have to
do with literary idiom? How are the other characters to be seen as masks? Extending the implication of mask as defined in motion, a definition which Peters (himself born in Sierra Leone) subscribes to in his preface, how does the interrelation of characters locate them in the context of dance? Or, to put the question as posed by Peters, but left unanswered: what (precisely) are the 'ideational parallels' of the novel? How do they influence literary meaning and mode? (*A Dance of Masks*, ix-x)

African masks in the main are not just worn on the face but carried on the head. They are a weight to be borne, an often quite considerable burden. As we see in *Arrow of God*, this correlates with a spiritual burden that the wearer must carry when the mask is put upon him. The balance he must display in keeping his head immobile while his body is in motion is a blend again demonstrating the ideal complement of flexibility and stability; 'real' and 'mythic' time fuse as the body of the present is spiritualised by the face of the past, itself in turn revitalised. A person may be a match for the literal burden, but not for the equally real spiritual one, unless he is 'supported' in his balancing by community, its music 'supporting' his steps. As might be expected, all of these principles, at once aesthetic and metaphysical, are invested in the masking of the first Chief Priest of Ulu:

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. (189)

What is most important is not the way in which anthropological detail authenticates the literal descriptions of traditional ceremony; rather, these occasions make manifest principles that organise the whole novel, fulfilling in fiction the same function that ritual does in life. The dialectic that relates mask to person, and the iconography of head portage that correlates physical balance with mental stability and spiritual equilibrium, is idiomatic.

In some ways, Ezeulu’s children can be seen as his masks. But, instead of dancing to the tune he plays, their actions call the rhythm of his destiny, dancing him toward his doom and moving the novel toward its ironic conclusion with a rhythmic inevitability: ‘Thereafter any yam harvested in the fields was harvested in the name of the son’ (230). The reverberations from sentence structure are undoubtedly Christian, reminding us that the son’s name is Peter. Much has already been said about the relation of Oduche to his father the Chief Priest. But another
way of expressing what his father requires of him is that he be the mask of the new god, which Ezeulu will wear, if need be, to gain access to the spirit of the whiteman's power. In the sense that Oduche is intended as the mask of Christ, his sacrifice by Ezeulu is the counterpart of ritual, which normally ensures the potency of transformation from mere matter into mask. Since the carving and the consecration of Oduche as mask are intended concurrently, Edogo's rejoinder to Ezeulu's remonstration against carving deities, that he is carving a mask and not a deity, although technically correct, is not to the point. Coming in the first few pages, Ezeulu's rejection of debate on this technical point is ominous, as his preparation of Oduche in various advisory situations throughout the novel runs parallel to Edogo's carving of the new mask. In the end, Ezeulu is the victim of a confusion of masks. Instead of making himself available to his father as the mask of the new god, Oduche offers himself as a mask of the old god to the new. The arrow of Ulu turns out to be the apostle of Christ. The Chief Priest is left exposed to the Christian god — as an enemy, rather than, as he had hoped, as an ally.

This unmasking of Ezeulu relates to his exploitation of imprisonment to punish his people; Oduche's betrayal reveals the impotency of his father's masking strategy of identification with the whiteman. The unmasking is completed by the defection of his people to the new god, the mask of which, as he is unable to assume it, becomes the vehicle of his downfall. The irony is that the supposed sacrifice to confirm Oduche ritually as the mask of Christ does indeed activate the power of the new religion, but not in terms of the traditional principle of relation vested in masks, rather as an unbalancing and repressive influence. A further irony, given the principle of head-portage that is central to the masking tradition, concerns the metaphor of 'supporting'. Whereas Ezeulu's failure at the end of the novel to maintain the 'cool' facial expression that is 'the ground of objects-on-head masking traditions' (African Art in Motion, 96) signifies his unmasking (concurrent with his loss of physical support — the leg), his unwitting instigation of 'the Christian harvest' (230) puts him in the inverse role of supporting the whiteman. This is the irony of his earlier claim to 'see things where other men are blind' (with Oduche-the-eye) and of his criticism of those who 'have shown the whiteman the way to our house and given him a stool to sit on' (132).

But if Oduche is the false mask, Obika is finally the load that cannot be carried. Aneto's reference to him as 'a broken pot' (224) is ominous, for it implies the physical instability of the bearer, and, metaphorically, a loss of equilibrium that must in the end relate to Ezeulu. It is important to realize that Obika's death occurs at a time when 'his body is not all his'
(223-24). His fever may well manifest infection, referring symbolically to Ezeulu’s attempt to identify himself in alliance with the leper whose handshake turns out to be an embrace. In narrative terms, it is obvious that Obika’s death while carrying Ogbazulobodo anticipates his father’s mad grief. But the relation is made more profound by the terms of the masking tradition in which it is cast.

Obika’s death is the concrete expression of his father’s destiny, the ritual run of Ogbazulobodo being the objective correlative of Ezeulu’s dream-state of mind that night. He dreams that his family has deserted his compound and that a burial party trespasses unchallenged as they sing the song of burial. Then, as he runs toward Obika’s hut in alarm, he is brought to a sudden halt by a single voice of profound sorrow: ‘The sweet agony of the solitary singer settled like dew on the head’ (222). This is the python-singer, whose song ends in the demented laughter of Ezeulu’s mother. The prophetic note obviously pertains to the insanity which will overtake Ezeulu at the end of the novel; but, at the same time, in settling ‘like dew on the head’ the song alludes to a previous designation of Obika, as a Night Mask ‘caught abroad by daylight’ (79). This is the image of Obika which precedes his whipping. It relates literally to the effects of a night of palm-wine drinking. But its metaphorical import is in the context of head-portage as the masking mode of displaying balance: ‘Obika felt an emptiness on top as if his head had been numbed by a whole night’s fall of dew’ (80). The feeling that his head does not belong to him has serious implications for the balancing of masks, ominous in relation to his death at the end of the novel, when the burden of the Night Mask of Ogbazulobodo proves too much for him. Effectively, the palm wine has left Obika without a head. Note that it is his unbalanced judgement, lacking ‘coolness’, which rewards him with a whipping, when he responds to the whitemen’s postural and facial expression of ‘uncool’ irritation by putting ‘more swagger into his walk’ (81). In the first permutation of metaphor, Obika’s feeling of numbness, as though he has no head, refers to his lack of a sense of gravity, or responsibility for his actions. In contrast, ‘The young man’s behaviour was like a heavy load on his father’s head’ (79). This is partly because Obika has not fully assumed his own identity, for he has not yet married. Formally he is still a child, his actions representing his father (the ‘head’ of his compound) rather than himself. As Ezeulu tells Nwafo: ‘In a few days his bride will come and he will no longer be called a child. When strangers see him they will no longer ask Whose son is he? but Who is he?’ (93). Nwafo sees his father’s face glisten with perspiration as he tells him this, as if what he speaks of is a physical burden. The fact that Obika is
not yet a man and already dances to his own tune means that instead of supporting his father-the-head, he is a load which his father-the-head must bear. At the end of the novel, the dew falls not on the head of Obika but on that of his father, the effect of the song of the python-singer in his dream. And when we come to the phenomenal parallel to this 'more than ordinary' dream (221), Obika carries the Night Mask with the feeling that it is his body, rather than his head, that is 'not all his'. The image of the father that accompanies the death of the son is of the funeral ram, recalling the ritual decapitation of this sacrificial beast during the induction of the new mask carved by Edogo. By an iconographic inversion, the 'uncool' manifestation of Ezeulu's 'utter amazement' at his son's death suggests the metaphor of the priest's unmasking. We have seen already how this facial display of instability relates to an unbalanced state of mind and anticipates Ezeulu's insanity from unmoderated grief. But the implication of the metaphor extends significantly further: 'uncool' facial expression, as a display of unbalanced mind, signifies in head-portage a loss of 'the power to surmount the natural head with the head which comes from the gods' (African Art in Motion, 96).

This explains why the final unmasking of Ezeulu — when Ulu, finding himself a god without power, abandons his Chief Priest — is conceived in terms of the symbolism of a ritual beheading. For in Africa, the mask is the head of the spiritualized wearer. The madness of unmasked Ezeulu signifies a profound loss of spirit, culturally symbolic in its coincidence with the 'Christian harvest'.

It is this ritual context of Ezeulu's fate that makes sense of the realignment of symbolism associated with Obika and his father. We see Ezeulu first through his own eyes, as the whip of Ulu, which will punish Umuaro; and then as one who is whipped by Ulu, struck down and covered with mud. Inversely, we see Obika first as one who is whipped and then as the whip itself. Finally, from his being a load on his father's head, he is transformed into the 'axe' (229) which removes all weight from his father's shoulders, a symbolic gesture prefigured by his role as executioner of the sacrificial ram during the ceremonial induction of a mask at the New Yam Feast.

To understand these metaphorical inversions we must keep in mind that ritual derives its meaning from beyond its immediate dramatic context, the individual status of those most directly concerned in its enactment being annihilated in favour of their symbolic figuration. It is not so much Obika who becomes the whip to punish Ezeulu as the son who flogs the father. That the symbolic death of the father as a funeral sacrifice to the son should occur in the context of Ogbazulobodo implies an
ironic reversal of this ritual, for the traditional purpose of this second burial rite, here arranged by the son (Aneto) for his father (Amalu), is to keep the deceased from the finality of Death. The final sentence of the novel points to the consequences of this ritual inversion: ‘Thereafter any yam harvested in his [the father’s] fields was harvested in the name of the son’ (230). The son is Oduche, Peter, Christ the Son of God — the son many a father ‘sent … with a yam or two to offer to the new religion and to bring back the promised immunity’. Oduche is the type of sacrifice, a Christ-figure — which makes the ritual conclusion all the more ironic, for it is the sacrifice of the father in the name of the son.

It would be misguided to see the ascendancy of the son as the total triumph of Christianity. After all, at a further point in the history of the Igbo, sons like Obi Okonkwo in No Longer At Ease will reject the Christian faith of their fathers (who are the sons in Arrow of God), Christianity is the only real choice that the people have if they are to harvest their yam and not collectively commit suicide.

Achebe’s comments on Christianity, although not directly concerned with the novel, are pertinent to its conclusion:

[I] wonder whether there is a suggestion that because of this great disruptive historical force, people were able to exercise infinitely less choice than perhaps might be the case, say, in Nigeria now. That of course there are still problems, moral choices and dilemmas and all the rest of it, but that the incredible tidal wave of the whiteman bringing his Christianity, which came in two or three generations and then receded, served to create enormous problems: not only politically but socially, even within family structures: and that the conflict in values was so sharp that for all but the toughest whole areas of choice had been taken away.

With the removal of choice comes the loss of responsibility, which is the most tragic consequence of colonialism and really what Arrow of God is all about: ‘You see, we’re no longer in charge of things. And once you take responsibility away from someone he becomes irresponsible. And my third book, Arrow of God, dramatises this problem … there you find the struggle by the chief priest to hold on to a sense of responsibility.’

At the end of the novel, Christianity offers the only way of survival: immunity from the will of Ulu. But the origin of Ulu is, as the novel makes quite clear, as a conscious construction in the minds of the people, an innovation of the past reflecting their desire for unity against other invasions — a spiritual invention. In this sense, their defection from Ulu does involve relinquishing responsibility for their own fate, although, ironically, they have no choice but to do so, or be wiped out by famine: ‘For a diety [sic] who chose a moment such as this to chastise his priest or
abandon him before his enemies was inciting people to take liberties; and Umuaro was just ripe to do so' (230). The initiative passes to Christianity when the Chief Priest loses the struggle to keep responsibility for his people. But giving up responsibility, behaving irresponsibly, is a very different thing from enabling the complete colonisation of the religious imagination. Christianity is accommodated and Ulu abandoned in a gesture of sheer pragmatism. There is no suggestion that the other gods of the Igbo pantheon will not continue to function as they always have in the mind of the people. Only Ulu has failed in his purpose and so become expendable.

It is the fault of the novel that there is no hint in the conclusion that the other gods will continue in their sphere of influence. But how else are we to explain the fact that, despite its significance in making Obika’s death a symbolic mode of sacrificing Ezeulu upon the altar of the Christian god, the image of the funeral ram is perfectly consistent with the burial ritual of decapitation that the first priest of Ulu transferred to his own cult from that of Idemili the Python?

Many aspects of the novel suggest that Ezeulu’s fate is as the priest of a god that loses the struggle for power and is stripped of its anklet by Idemili. I am not the first to notice this. But here too the supporting mode of the masking tradition, and the kinetic iconography of stable/flexible ideals, is important. For instance, although Ezeulu interprets the weather that overtakes him on his journey from Okperi to Umuaro as part of the suffering to which his people expose him by sending him there in the first place, the rain is personified to remind us of Idemili, the Pillar of Water that holds up the Raincloud as the pillar of a house supports the roof: ‘the rain seemed to say: Now is the time; there are no houses on the way where they can seek shelter. It took both hands off its support and fell down with immense, smothering abandon’ (182). Achebe’s italics here might just as well represent the voice of Idemili, and the rain can be seen as a blow struck against Ulu, blinding his priest, making him stiff, inflexible: ‘the water that blinded him … went on and on until Ezeulu’s fingers held on to his staff like iron claws.’ (The staff is a traditional symbol of spiritual power. We see in the death scene of Chapter Eleven that an inability to hold on to one’s personal staff signifies desertion by one’s personal god, prophesying death. There the sick man’s fingers ‘close, like claws,’ around his staff in a desperate but futile attempt to grasp it, to continue in the active idiom of saying ‘no’ to death.)

In the end, the Chief Priest’s insanity is implicitly associated with Idemili by the song of the python-singer in his dream, a song which ends with his mother’s demented laughter. It is this python-song that affects
him like ‘dew on the head’, which recalls Obika’s headless feeling on the way to his whipping and anticipates Ezeulu’s own symbolic decapitation. At the same time, I would suggest, it looks back upon the ‘heady’ feeling he had when caught between Okperi and Umuaro in the rain, linking the symbolism of his ultimate fate with the suffering he experiences under Idemili. That the final image of Ezeulu as a figure ritually beheaded has its place in the normal burial rites accorded to Ulu’s priests is ironically appropriate: he is in a sense manoeuvred into the role of ritual victim by Idemili. Through the sacrifice of Ulu to the Christian god Idemili ensures that the new religion’s triumph is only a partial one, ironically aiding his own survival.

In the end there can be no one interpretation of Arrow of God, and, true as this may be for any literature, here it relates less to the Lockean subjectivism that is at the root of Western individuation of perception than to a specifically African kinetic conception of reality: ‘The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place’ (46). Standing in Ezeulu’s place we see him abandoned by his own god, a god stripped inexplicably of its power: ‘What could it point to but the collapse and ruin of all things?’ (229). From the perspective of Umuaro and its leaders the issue is simple: ‘Their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest’ (230). It is perhaps a fault that we are not given Idemili’s point of view (but then we are not given Ulu’s either; and through which character could the gods communicate to us at the novel’s conclusion?). It is probable that Idemili sees in the outcome of events that something has been lost as well as gained: his old rival is destroyed, but now there is a new one to contend with, its power untried. At a later point in time, beyond the novel, the sky (to which he belongs) will recede from him, leaving him to lament his betrayal by ‘empty men’ who hearken to

A charlatan bell that calls
Unknown monotones of revolts,
Scandals, and false immunities.\(^\text{13}\)

Winterbottom is accustomed to monotones and scandals: ‘If you saw, as I did, a man buried alive up to his neck with a piece of roast yam on his head to attract vultures you know...’ (36; 56). Unable to move from this mental position, he sees and hears nothing of Ezeulu. Nevertheless, he offers another way of interpretation. Even Winterbottom’s imperialist image of Africa (Heart of Darkness) refers parodically to all of the intersecting symbolic motifs of the conclusion: sacrifice, burial, division of
head and body (at the ground-level, dividing earth and sky), head-portage (the yam).

The hermeneutic principle of *Arrow of God* is one of fluid movement from one position to another, a dancing of attitudes which, in the reader’s way of relating them, composes his/her own contribution to what the novel is *doing*. A sense of rhythm and of balance is needed to activate the shifting patterns of metaphor and to relate the different faces of truth, where truth is ‘like a Mask dancing’ and its ‘characters’ are permutations of its essence.

Psychology is not equal to this complexity of masks. Essentially, the procession of masks marks a ritual of disunification, dividing village from village, father from son, and driving a wedge into religious sensibility to divide its allegiance into potential conflict.

The six villages of Umuaro are ritually united in the first place through the symbolism of masking, when the first priest of Ulu receives the god’s head: he kneels down a man and stands up a spirit. Inversely, what we witness throughout *Arrow of God*, the disintegration of unity and the movement toward Christianity, is raised ‘to the stature of a ritual passage’ by being consecrated (as Achebe tells us in his preface) by the priest’s own personal agony. That is, the historical process of the novel is ritually concentrated in the unmasking of the Chief Priest, what the author calls (again in the preface) ‘his high historical destiny as victim’, as a symbolic figure beheaded in the image of his god.

The potential and the limits of individual participation in the communal context are dramatised as they are encoded by idiom in *Arrow of God*. At the core of the colonial relationship, as T.O. Ranger declares, is ‘the successful manipulation and control of symbols’. Ezeulu undoubtedly fails in this power struggle; but the novel does not. Nor does Idemili. Implicit in much ‘criticism’ of Achebe’s fiction is the honorific judgement that it extends the Great Tradition of the Nineteenth-Century Novel in its European Heyday; were this true, from a post-colonial point of view it would be an accusation, for, as Gayatri Spivak and others have demonstrated, that form of fiction encodes the ideal of Empire (by investing narrative authority in omniscient or centralised perspective, by proposing concepts of universalised value, etc.). The accusation, of course, is false. Achebe has captured the symbolic form of the novel from the ‘central’ tradition, and grounded it upon an aesthetic of movement and motion and agility — which, as he says, ‘inform the Igbo concept of existence’ and so, by a paradigm shift, reconstitute the nature and experience of fiction. The reader must engage with a kinetic performance, must participate in a process: ‘Ada-akwu ofu ebe enene mmoo; you do
not stand in one place to watch a masquerade. You must imitate its motion.' The process is one of socialisation and constant renewal, functioning by an 'overlap' of multiple perspectives — individual and communal, call-and-response, solo-and-circle — that redefines the imperial concept of the centre in African terms, in terms of slippage: as that blank space where innovation inscribes itself on the ground of tradition.

NOTES


2. This critical model is an adaptation of the 'metronome sense' advocated as essential to an understanding of African music by Richard Alan Waterman, 'African Influence on the Music of the Americas', in Sol Tax, ed., *Acculturation in the Americas* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1952), p. 211. I am indebted also to John Miller Chernoff's discussion of African music as an energising educational force, in *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (1979; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 154 ff: 'As a style of human conduct, participation in an African musical event characterizes a sensibility with which Africans relate to the world and commit themselves to its affairs. As a cultural expression, music is a product of this sensibility, but more significantly, as a social force, music helps shape this sensibility. . . . music’s explicit purpose, in the various ways it might be defined by Africans, is, essentially, a socialization. An individual learns the potentials and limitations of participation in a communal context dramatically arranged for the engagement, display, and critical examination of fundamental cultural values.' Further references are given in the text.


8. The ritual running of *Oghazulobodo* would traditionally mark a passage from one stage of 'living death' to another, calling the deceased 'inside' from suffering since first burial, ensuring 'personal immortality' in the 'now-period', on the human side of
In general terms, Nigerian poetry in English before the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) was marked by an excessive preoccupation with private grief and emotions over and above societal tragedies and triumphs, undue eurocentrism, derivationism, obscurantism and private esotericism. This tendency may be attributed to, among other factors, the fact that until the Civil War, Nigeria had no major public historical rallying point. The colonial struggles were waged by the various tribal kingdoms with little or no inter-ethnic co-operation; amalgamation was carried out by agents of an external force; the struggle for independence was neither violent nor concerted on a national scale; and independence itself was merely another gimmick for entrenching a few greedy members of the native élite. The Civil War on the other hand was a crystallizing experience as it was the one time when virtually every Nigerian was forced by the nature of the issues at stake to take a stand, primarily, a