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## Ambiguity in achebe's arrow of god

### Abstract

The major conflicts in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* develop around the person of the Chief Priest of the god Ulu who is the ritual and religious leader of Umuaro. On the one hand, there is the conflict between the local British administration represented by Winterbottom, the District Commissioner, and the native authority represented by Ezeulu, the Chief Priest. On the other hand, there are the internal politics of Umuaro and the conflict between the supporters of Ezeulu and those of his rival, Ezidemili. On yet another level belongs the conflict taking place within Ezeulu himself, a conflict between personal power, the temptation to constitute himself into an 'arrow' of God, and the exigencies of public responsibility.

## Ambiguity in Achebe's *Arrow of God*

The major conflicts in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*<sup>1</sup> develop around the person of the Chief Priest of the god Ulu who is the ritual and religious leader of Umuaro. On the one hand, there is the conflict between the local British administration represented by Winterbottom, the District Commissioner, and the native authority represented by Ezeulu, the Chief Priest. On the other hand, there are the internal politics of Umuaro and the conflict between the supporters of Ezeulu and those of his rival, Ezidemili. On yet another level belongs the conflict taking place within Ezeulu himself, a conflict between personal power, the temptation to constitute himself into an 'arrow' of God, and the exigencies of public responsibility. All these are handled in the main plot. A subsidiary plot deals with the domestic tensions and crises in Ezeulu's own household, the tensions and stresses between the father and his grown-up sons and between the children of different mothers in his polygamous household.

Not all these conflicts are a result of culture contact or power politics within the traditional framework. Personality deficiencies and mistaken judgements have something to do with them. The aim of this paper is to show that Ezeulu is not only a complex but an ambiguous character. He is ambiguous because his motives are always mixed and spring from numerous, often conflicting, interests dictated in part by his personal drives and in part by the demands of his priestly office. The result is that he appears in different ways to different characters in the novel. Thus, to his eldest son, Edogo, he is a quintessential paternalist. Edogo complains that 'He must go on treating his grown children like little boys, and if they ever said no there was a big quarrel. This was why the older his children grew the more he seemed to dislike them' (p. 113). To Akuebue, his best friend, he is a proud and stubborn man but at the same time a model of integrity. Akuebue defends his integrity to the rest of the elders

over the New Year Feast controversy, when it is suggested that he is starving the community out of his capricious will and not in obedience to Ulu. 'He is a proud man and the most stubborn person you know is only his messenger,' says Akuebue, 'but he would not falsify the decision of Ulu' (p. 266). His enemies, especially Nwaka of Umunneora, and the priest of Idemili, see him as a power-monger who delights in imposing his will on others. 'He is a man of ambition; he wants to be king, priest, diviner, all. His father, they said, was like that. But Umuaro showed him that Igbo people knew no kings' (p. 33). Captain Winterbottom sees him also as a man of integrity who could stand up for truth in a land dispute between two rival villages, Umuaro and Okperri, but erroneously attributes this integrity to the man's religious scruples; 'he must have had some pretty fierce tabu working on him' (p. 45), he tells Clarke, his deputy and newly-arrived British administrator.

Despite the cloak of ambiguity that surrounds the character of Ezeulu, one central fact is clear: Ezeulu the man cannot be easily separated from Ezeulu the Chief Priest of Ulu — though it is possible to see when the factor of personal character is dominant, as in Ezeulu's dealings with members of his family, and when the priestly character takes over, as in the consideration of serious affairs of politics and religion. But one must not over-emphasize the separation of these aspects and the roles attaching to them. Even in his private relationships, the priest is often not far away from the man. Akuebue sums up the composite nature of Ezeulu's personality when he says to him: 'Half of you is man and the other half spirit' (p. 164), a fact symbolically represented when half his body (the spirit side) is painted over with white chalk on religious ceremonies. It is also said that 'half of the things he ever did were done by this spirit side' (p. 241). And herein lies the essentially tragic and ambiguous nature of Ezeulu's character, with the divine essence in him always straining to assert its integrity in the face of distracting interference from his human essence.

The narrative in *Arrow of God* starts *in medias res*, dipping back from time to time into the past for the historical material with which Achebe shows the coming into existence of the six villages that now comprise Umuaro. From these brief but significant flashes back into the past, we build up a picture of the pre-colonial society with which the colonial present is contrasted. At a critical stage early in the narrative, after he has seen his advice set aside by the community, not once but twice in quick succession, Ezeulu reviews the situation, using the opportunity to reiterate the

historical and ritual charter of his role as first among the elders of the clan:

In the very distant past, when lizards were still few and far between, the six villages — Umuachala, Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezani, Umuogwuwu and Umuisiuzo — lived as different people, and each worshipped its own deity. Then the hired soldiers of Abam used to strike in the dead of night, set fire to houses and carry men, women and children into slavery. Things were so bad for the six villages that their elders came together to save themselves. They hired a strong team of medicine-men to instal a common deity for them. This deity which the fathers of the six villages made was called Ulu.... The six villages then took the name of Umuaro, and the priest of Ulu became their Chief Priest. From that day they were never again beaten by an enemy. (p. 17)

But all that seems to have suddenly changed. When the novel opens, the authority of the Chief Priest is under active attack from the priest of Idemili who uses his kinsman, the wealthy, volatile and demagogic titled elder Nwaka of Umunneora. Relegated to subordinate status because of the creation of Ulu, Idemili's priest has never forgotten this setback and has been in latent opposition to the priest of Ulu from time immemorial. Ezeulu himself is aware of this: 'He knew that the priests of Idemili, and Ogwugwu and Eru and Udo had never been happy with their secondary role since the villages got together and made Ulu and put him over the older deities' (p. 49). But the resentment has been played down as long as the threat to collective security continues, since group solidarity is necessary to meet external threat and since only a deity evolved in the spirit of collective solidarity can be an adequate unifying symbol to ensure this solidarity.

The presence of the colonial administration has the effect of increasing the need for collective security, since the colonial authority has taken away from the traditional authority and their peoples their right to exercise judicial or even non-legal violence. The exercise of judicial coercion and violence belongs solely to the colonial regime from now onwards, as the people of Umuaro are to learn when they wage war on the people of Okperri. But the worst forms of local insecurity such as those caused by the Abam slave-raiders are certainly over. It is not surprising that institutions evolved to ensure collective security begin to weaken when the threats which gave rise to them are no longer felt. And the effect of the superimposition of a higher authority with a greater power of coercive violence is to create a ferment in the structure of traditional authority itself. Specifically, the older gods of Umuaro accepted dominance of Ulu as long as the old power structure remained. But now,

with the imposition of a higher authority over Ulu, the minor gods see the situation as an opportunity to shake off an irksome hegemony. The resentment that lay dormant in pre-colonial days became active again. The speech in which Nwaka repudiates the right of Ulu to lead the clan expresses all this. The speech is made at a secret meeting attended only by Nwaka's partisans:

Nwaka began by telling the assembly that Umuaro must not allow itself to be led by the Chief Priest of Ulu. 'My father did not tell me that before Umuaro went to war it took leave from the priest of Ulu,' he said. The man who carries a deity is not a king. He is there to perform its ritual and to carry sacrifice to it. But I have been watching this Ezeulu for many years. He is a man of ambition; he wants to be king, priest, diviner, all. His father, they said, was like that. But Umuaro showed him that Igbo people knew no kings.

We have no quarrel with Ulu. He is still our protector, even though we no longer fear Abam warriors at night. But I will not see with these eyes of mine his priest making himself lord over us. My father did not tell me that Ezeulu was king of Umuaro. Who is he, anyway? Does anybody here enter his compound through the man's gate? If Umuaro decided to have a king we know where he would come from. Since when did Umuachala become head of the six villages? We all know that it was jealousy among the big six villages that made them give the priesthood to the weakest. We shall fight for our farmland and for the contempt Okperri has poured on us. Let us not listen to anyone trying to frighten us with the name of Ulu. If a man says yes his *chi* says yes. And we have all heard how the people of Aniuta dealt with their deity when he failed them. Did they not carry him to the boundary between them and their neighbours and set fire on him? (p. 33)

This is a piece of demagoguery, to be treated with reserve. For instance, it is difficult to credit the view that the Chief Priest whose deity leads the people to war and protects them from external and internal insecurities does not have a strong voice in determining war policy. After all, if he refuses to perform the ritual functions of his priesthood, it is hard to see how his deity can be involved in action at all. The incitement against the authority of the Chief Priest is possible because the threat that made the founding of Ulu necessary has receded. Nwaka says as much. But traditional people are not so foolish as to base their institutions so narrowly. Indeed, Ulu's power is not tied only to the provision of security. His priest keeps the agricultural calendar and calls the biggest feast of the year, the Feast of the New Yam which ushers in the harvest season. So his protection of security is not only religious, political, military and ethical, but also economic, and extends to such things as the keeping of communal census. Nwaka's uncompromising attack is therefore a serious schismatic move indicative of the falling apart of the old collective

ideology. His charge of ambition is exaggerated, though there is no doubt that Ezeulu's conception of power is exorbitant.

A peacetime Chief Priest has less scope for extending his power. Ezeulu is unaware of the limitation of his power and of the precise nature of his priesthood as the expression of corporate rather than personal will. This is shown in his own soliloquy:

Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real. It was true he named the day for the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and for the New Yam feast; but he did not choose the day. He was merely a watchman. His power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his. As long as the goat was alive it was his; he would find it food and take care of it. But the day it was slaughtered he would know who the real owner was. No! the Chief Priest of Ulu was more than that, must be more than that. If he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival — no planting and no reaping. But could he refuse? No Chief Priest had ever refused. So it could not be. He would not dare.

Ezeulu was stung to anger by this as though his enemy had spoken it.

'Take away that word dare,' he replied to this enemy. 'Yes I say take it away. No man in all Umuaro can stand up and say that I dare not. The woman who will bear the man who will say it has not yet been born.' (pp. 3-4)

This is a dangerous speculation — as dangerous as Nwaka's demagogic incitement. Even though until he refuses to call the feast of the New Year the Chief Priest acts within his ritual rights and authority, in his mind he has already begun to assume for himself vast illegal powers that justify Nwaka's accusation. His thought is to prove father to his subsequent act. Though no overt action of his justifies the accusation of ambition, he has within him undoubted authoritarian urges at odds with the republican outlook of the people. So Nwaka's accusation cannot be dismissed out of hand, but is borne in mind, and lights up the subsequent action.

The authoritarian urge in Ezeulu contributes to the final crisis when a greater flexibility and devotion to the common weal would have eased the situation. Nwaka's appeal to the republican sentiment is an astute move, calculated to carry weight with an egalitarian people, as the people of Umuaro appear to be. Nwaka is aware of the mobile nature of the society, as well as its hierarchical features, but he chooses to emphasize the one and to ignore the other. The open attack on Ezeulu's authority, which would have been unthinkable in Okonkwo's Umuofia, becomes possible in Umuaro because under the combined pressure of the new colonial administration, the Christian Church and the new economic forces, the oracles and the priests are beginning to lose their hold on the

people. Nwaka's subversion of Ezeulu's power succeeds because of the encroaching changes which are working towards a realignment of relationships and a readjustment of attitudes.

Ulu's dominance in the structure of traditional power is itself a result of social change. It represents a certain centralizing trend somewhat at odds with the federalizing, segmentary political relationships of earlier times.

There is an ironic twist to the strategy that Ezeulu adopts in his attempt to come to terms with the reality of the colonial presence. The Chief Priest who, as a symbolic head, should be the rallying point of resistance to the colonial authority, is unwittingly an instrument for subversion of the traditional system. At Winterbottom's prompting, he sends his young son Oduche to join the Christians and attend the village school. Oduche is to become Ezeulu's 'eye' in the new situation. His reason is perfectly rational: one must change with the changing times. Several times this pragmatism finds outlet in a recurrent proverb: 'A man must dance the dance prevalent in his time' and more poignantly in the extended metaphor of the elusive bird. 'I am like the bird Eneke-nti-oba,' he asserts. 'Men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching' (p. 55). In other words, Ezeulu sees the strength of the new forces and is attempting to come to terms with them. With Oduche as a lookout in the enemy camp, the chief feels more secure. But as it turns out, this feeling proves illusory. Although Ezeulu is described by his creator as an intellectual, someone who goes to the root of things and thinks about why they happen, he is cast in the role of the archetypal philosopher-king whose broad vision and comprehensive outlook on the world are his strength and, at the same time, the main source of his tragic flaw.

In his delicate calculation to keep the old, traditional world apart from the new, alien world of the white man until he knows more about the nature of the latter, Ezeulu commits an error of judgement as a result of his blindness to a universal truth, namely, that no matter how one stands one cannot see *all* the sides of a dancing Mask. Ezeulu sends Oduche to the Christian Church, and the boy loses his sense of respect and fear toward the taboos of the clan. Unwittingly, the Chief Priest becomes the man who brings the proverbial ant-infested faggots into the hut and is surprised when lizards start to pay him a visit. Ezeulu is never tired of admonishing his people with the aphorism about the man who brings an ant-infested faggot into the house. But because of his own blind spot,

Ezeulu fails to recognize the ironic applicability of the saying to the way he tries to handle the question of the white man and his religion:

But now Ezeulu was becoming afraid that the new religion was like a leper. Allow him a handshake and he wants an embrace. Ezeulu had already spoken to his son who was becoming more strange everyday. Perhaps the time had come to bring him out again. But what would happen if, as many oracles prophesied, the white man had come to take over the land and rule? In such a case it would be wise to have a man of your family in his band. (p. 51)

What Ezeulu is attempting here is a pragmatic accommodation of the future in the present. He not only foresees, he wants to forestall; but that is impossible. The present cannot accommodate the future; one has to give way to the other completely. Ezeulu likes to think that Oduche is in the Christian community as an uninvolved observer. But the situation admits of no such ambivalence. One is either serving the Christian God or the ancestral deity; he cannot owe allegiance to both at the same time. By sending his son to the mission, Ezeulu is inextricably compromised, whether he recognizes or admits it or not.

Oduche, the sacrificial offering to the new forces, precipitates the first of Ezeulu's crises. He becomes a Christian diehard, tries to suffocate a royal python, the totemic animal sacred to Idemili, and is found out. This heightens the ill will between the priest of Idemili and Ezeulu, their families, villages and partisans in the clan. Ezeulu's sending Oduche to school is, in the eyes of his enemies, part of his strategy for reinforcing his personal power by ingratiating himself with the British administration. Earlier, the good opinion of the District Commissioner, won by testifying against the clan in the land dispute with Okperri, had been chalked up by his enemies as Ezeulu's first open act of betrayal and proof of his ambition. His son's sacrilege now, five years later, revives the memory and bitterness of that betrayal. Taken together, the two events look like an attempt by the Chief Priest to reach a personal accommodation with the forces threatening the old social order. And this renders his motives suspicious and dishonourable to his enemies and disturbing to his friends. His best friend and kinsman, Akuebue, finds it hard to reconcile Ezeulu's traditional role as protector of communal tradition with his implied attack on this heritage by sending his son to join the Christians. He expresses his doubts:

When you spoke against the war Okperri you were not alone. I too was against it and so were many others. But if you send your son to join strangers in desecrating the

land you will be alone. You may go and mark it on that wall to remind you that I said so. (p. 166)

The strain of ambiguity in Ezeulu is pushed to the fore by the shattering blow which is yet to fall. Although Winterbottom at times exhibits total ignorance of Igbo custom to an astonishing degree, he knows and tells Clarke that the Ibo man, when given a small chance to rule over his people, will not only become an instant tyrant but will arrogate all authority to himself. The captain has the example of the chief at Okperri to give as evidence, the petty chief who insists on being addressed as His Highness Obi Ikedi the First, and has all but declared himself Defender of the Faith. Winterbottom has decided to reward Ezeulu by appointing him Paramount Chief in pursuance of the colonial administration's policy of Indirect Rule. But the choice could not have been made at a less auspicious time than when the Chief Priest is taunted by his enemies as the creature of the British administration. Ezeulu's refusal to come running for a chieftainship from Winterbottom precipitates the crisis that culminates in Umuaro people's desertion of their god Ulu for the God of the Christians. Ezeulu's refusal to accept the chieftaincy is read differently by both his enemies and the administration. To the administration, the Chief Priest is a thankless fetish-priest; to his enemies in Umuaro, he arouses their suspicion when he calls a meeting of the elders to acquaint them with the summons from the District Commissioner. The meeting turns sour when Nwaka, Ezeulu's arch-enemy, delivers a long, caustic and heavily sarcastic speech in which he berates Ezeulu for what Nwaka considers a dangerous collaboration with the white man on whose side the chief priest had been during the war with Okperri and to whose school he has recently sent his son. Ezeulu's subsequent arrest and imprisonment pushes him to the thought of revenge, both personal and divine.<sup>1</sup> His incarceration at Okperri he regards as part of Ulu's grand design to avenge his priest and punish Umuaro. For with the chief priest in prison, the ritual sighting of the moon cannot be performed, and since the number of the moons declared seen by Ezeulu determines the time of harvest, the Feast of the New Yam has to be postponed.

Some critics have seen Ulu's direct involvement in the dispute as a clear vindication of Ezeulu's action against the villagers. G. D. Killam in *The Novels of Chinua Achebe* (1969)<sup>2</sup> does not think that Ezeulu is acting out of personal spite or the desire to avenge the insult to himself. Rather, says Killam, the Chief Priest and the whole of Umuaro are caught in a more

than human drama.<sup>3</sup> To support this view, Killam quotes Ezeulu's old friend, Akuebue, 'the only man in Umuaro who knew that Ezeulu was not deliberately punishing the six villages as some people thought. He knew that the Chief Priest was helpless; that a greater thing than *nte* was caught in *nte*'s trap' (p. 265). Be that as it may, the delay in harvesting the yams has hurt the people. In their desperation and confusion, the people turn to the Christian religion for salvation by sending their sons with yam offerings to the Christian harvest festival and thereafter harvest their crops in the name of their sons. Killam further quotes the moral that the people draw from Ezeulu's tragedy: 'To them the issue was simple. Their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors — that no man however great was greater than his people; that no man ever won judgement against his clan' (p. 287).

The question that Killam fails to ask is: what if Ulu had not intervened? Could Ezeulu have just skipped the two yams left and declared the Feast of the New Yam? Of course not. The real issue here is not divine intervention, but human motivation. The irony is that the critic makes the same mistake as the character he is attempting to exonerate.

A superficial reading of the novel and a literal interpretation of the role of Ezeulu as just a mere arrow in the bow of his god might give the erroneous impression that the Chief Priest is an amoral agent of the deity. Of course, Ezeulu himself believes this. As he tells the delegates sent to plead with him, 'I am the Chief Priest of Ulu and what I have told you is his will not mine ... this is not my doing. The gods sometimes use us as a whip' (p. 261). I will point out presently that this is a simplistic way of putting the essentially complex and ambiguous role of the Chief Priest. But to go back to Killam's interpretation: by relying heavily on Ezeulu's own analysis of the god's injunction, an analysis that can hardly be described as objective, Killam fails to recognize the necessarily ambiguous role of the god and other divine elements in the novel, and thus misses the central irony. In an interview with Lewis Nkosi, Achebe himself gives a clue to his intention in *Arrow of God*. 'I am handling a whole lot of ... more complex themes, like the relationship between a god and his priest ... and I am interested in this old question of who decides what shall be the wish of the gods, and ... that kind of situation.'<sup>4</sup> That, precisely, is the core of the ambiguity in the novel which must be analysed before any valid statement can be made about Ezeulu's motivation.

Achebe's enigma is posed right from the beginning with the lack of a precise definition of the nature and extent of the power of the Chief Priest. Are we to take the will of the Chief Priest as Ulu's (a position which Ezeulu assumes)? Judging from the words of Ulu, the answer clearly is no, for the deity implies that he has no need for human intermediary in the exercise of his divine prerogatives.

'Ta! Nwanu!' barked Ulu in his ears, as a spirit would in the ear of an impertinent human child. 'Who told you that this was your own fight?'

Ezeulu trembled and said nothing.

'I say who told you that this was your own fight which you could arrange to suit you? You want to save your friends who brought you palm-wine he—he—he!' laughed the deity the way spirits do — a dry skeletal laugh. 'Beware you do not come between me and my victim or you may receive blows not meant for you! Do you not know what happens when two elephants fight? Go home and sleep and leave me to settle my quarrel with Idemili who wants to destroy me so that his python may come to power. Now tell me how it concerns you. I say go home and sleep...' (pp. 240-41)

This is the assertion of what Ezeulu describes as his spirit side, and on the strength of it he renews his act of revenge against Umuaro. If, on the other hand, we believe, as Ezeulu also does in a sense, that the power of the Chief Priest is some kind of alliance between god and man, we have then to answer the inevitable question: where does one draw the line between the two wills and what order of priority does one give to them? The answer here, again, is that no human can accurately draw such a line. But, as we have seen, Ezeulu's presumption makes him believe that he is in some kind of holy alliance with Ulu, and with this conviction he weaves a pattern of doom for Umuaro and calls it nothing but divine justice. Actually, as M. J. Melamu rightly recognizes, Ulu's intervention is meant to shock Ezeulu back into an awareness of his true position in the cosmic order.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the warning is again lost on the chief priest.

Long before we hear the awful voice of Ulu, Ezeulu has been dreaming of his revenge. In prison at Okperri, we are told, his 'greatest pleasure came from the thought of his revenge which had suddenly formed in his mind as he sat listening to Nwaka in the marketplace' (p. 198). Having made up his mind and settled upon the method of reprisal, Ezeulu begins to interpret events from this personal angle. His decision to send Oduche to the mission school, the boy's attempt to kill the sacred python, Ezeulu's own recent imprisonment, all are seen by the Chief Priest as a mysterious but special divine ordering of forces to further his revenge. It is true that Ezeulu at one time considers the possibility of reconciliation

with the villagers, but that is no more than a passing thought. And since he is convinced of his personal justification he can afford to dally with magnanimity without necessarily planning to display it:

Behind his thinking was of course the knowledge that the fight would not begin until the time of the harvest after three-moons. So there was plenty of time. Perhaps it was this knowledge that there was no hurry which gave him confidence to play with alternatives — to dissolve his resolution and at the right time form it again. Why should a man be in a hurry to lick his fingers; was he going to put them away in the rafter? (p. 240)

Ezeulu's almost sadistic delight in his revenge would account for his quick interpretation of Ulu's words to correspond to his own wishes. Nobody can deny Ezeulu's own suffering, but I think it is more of a measure of the ambiguity of his motivation. He loves the people, yet he compulsively helps to destroy them.

On the other hand, however, it would be equally naïve to ascribe Umuaro's suffering only to Ezeulu's act of revenge. There is little doubt that Ulu himself is visiting the sins of the people on their heads. What Ezeulu and Killam confuse is the human revenge of the Chief Priest and the divine justice of the deity. They both forget that revenge is not justice but an unreasonable human retribution which has a way of getting out of proportion to the original offence and thereby constituting a new crime. Hence we hear Ezeulu lament that Umuaro's present suffering is not just temporary but will be for all time. Ironically, Ezeulu feels a sense of community with the people in their suffering for the result of his revenge, seeing his own participation in the general distress as part of his function as the priest who pays the debt of every man, woman, and child in Umuaro. But in his interpretation of the god's justice he temporarily forgets this responsibility and remembers only his power. He comes to look at divine justice through his flawed vision as something from which he is excluded because of his earlier rectitude in the war with Okperri. He errs fatally in thinking that the justice of the gods is visited only upon the guilty. He says to Ulu in effect, 'I have done no evil, therefore I must not suffer.' He fails to see that true justice is a mysterious order in which the sins of individuals within a community are visited on the whole community; an order in which the sins of the guilty are visited on all — guilty and innocent alike. Ezeulu defines justice in non-personal terms, calling on Ulu, 'Let justice be done — on others!' He forgets that far from being outside of this moral, if unfathomable order, far from being a mere spectator, a mere arrow in the bow of the deity, an unimplicated executioner,

he is the pivot on which the whole order rotates. He is the Chief Priest of Ulu. As Richmond Hathorn remarks, '... which of us is innocent? The gods must use the guilty to check the guilty and must employ the polluted to expunge pollution. After all, they have agents of no other kind. To their eyes, and to their eyes only, out of the tangle of earthly injustices emerges the divine design of justice itself.'<sup>6</sup> The incomprehensibility of the whole mystery of this order of justice remains with Ezeulu to the end. At his final tragedy he asks himself again and again,

... why had Ulu chosen to deal thus with him, to strike him down and cover him with mud? What was his offence? Had he not divined the god's will and obeyed it? When was it ever heard that a child was scalded by the piece of yam its own mother put in its palm? What man would send his son with a potsherd to bring fire from a neighbour's hut and then unleash rain on him? Who ever sent his son up the palm to gather nuts and then took an axe and felled the tree? But today such a thing had happened before the eyes of all. What could it point to but the collapse and ruin of all things? ... (p. 286)

Actually it points to no such thing, at least not in the cosmic order. It is only a reaffirmation of things as they should be. Ezeulu comes to his *Quod Erat Demonstrandum* without proving all the equations. He has divined the god's will but only partially. He has tried to carry out Ulu's order but has failed to include himself in its execution. He looks at himself as the accuser but fails to see that he is also the accused. And without the recognition of this paradox there can be no proper grasp of the concept of justice and the proper role of the scapegoat, which is the office of Ezeulu.

The novel closes as it does with Ezeulu's dementedness because he fails to accept his own moral responsibility for the general sin of the clan. Ezeulu falls into excuses for his downfall when he should have regarded it as an opportunity for self-development. Ezeulu regards his own situation as basically a crime-and-punishment formula. Failing to recognize the crime, he ascribes the punishment to some malevolent machination of a god who abandons his priest in a panic. Although Ezeulu has sinned against the gods, his tragedy is not really a matter of crime and punishment, but a failure of moral self-recognition.

*Arrow of God* illustrates the classical situation of a house divided against itself which, with or without any assistance from an external force, must collapse. For as one character remarks in the novel, 'the house which the stranger has been seeking ways to pull down has caught fire of its own will' (p. 106). The action in *Arrow of God* centres around Ezeulu's

running battle against two threats to himself and his clan. As I have pointed out in the preceding pages, Ezeulu locks horns with reactionary elements within the clan who, for various reasons, want to displace him and the deity he represents from the long-established hierarchy of the village deities. This represents the internal front of the war, and the opposing forces are led by Nwaka. From the outside come the forces of the British colonial institutions represented by Winterbottom. Achebe carefully balances the two forces and the roles they play in the destruction of Ezeulu.

The external forces working against the traditional way of life seem already entrenched in *Arrow of God*. The local school and mission station, irreverent strangers like the catechist Goodcountry, and the white man's presence, all these may be seen as the tip of the iceberg. For underneath lie the internal divisions within Umuaro itself. The external forces have merely helped to undermine traditional confidence and to shake the sense of common purpose and solidarity which in the past constituted the spirit of traditionalism. Some of the lesser characters bear witness to these changes in matter-of-fact remarks which show that they are realistic enough to recognize that these changes are there to stay. A character, for example, sees Mr Wright's new road connecting Umuaro and the administrative town of Okperri as a part of the new forces that are transforming the old society:

Yes, we are talking about the white man's road. But when the roof and walls of a house fall in, the ceiling is not left standing. The white man, the new religion, the soldiers, the new road, they are all part of the same thing. The white man has a gun, a matchet, a bow and carries fire in his mouth. He does not fight with one weapon alone. (p. 105)

The theme of contact and change is not carried by such overstatements but rather by the human drama, in which those deeply entrenched in the past attempt to adapt to the present.

As the representatives of the external forces that Ezeulu has to contend with, the administrative officers are portrayed in such a way that things can be seen from their point of view. The white characters are not however explored in any great detail, except in so far as they are one of the forces operating on the traditional culture and on Africans, as agents of change, in which role their ignorance of local customs becomes a functional part of the development of plot.

Achebe assumes this ignorance in his white characters. Their physical and social distance from the local people is considerable. Winterbottom's

official residence in Okperri, for instance, is called 'Government Hill' and is set up far away from where 'the natives' live. One of the most stringent colonial taboos is that which forbids serving officers 'undue familiarity' with colonial subjects. Captain Winterbottom, who conceives it as part of his duty to keep the administrative staff in line (like 'a school prefect'), takes steps to stop one of his junior officers from socializing with the local people and thus lowering himself 'in the eyes of the natives'. It is not surprising that his understanding of local life is a mixture of stereotyped colonial prejudices and ethnographic fallacies, such as that the '*ikenga* is the most important fetish in the Ibo man's arsenal, so to speak', that 'One thing you must remember in dealing with natives is that like children they are great liars' and that 'the Ibos in the distant past assimilated a small non-negroid tribe of the same complexion as the Red Indians'.

Achebe does not set out to damage the administrative officers particularly, except by poking fun at their ignorance which is only matched by their conceit.

By standing above the traditional institutions, and especially by setting up a court (where he judges cases 'in ignorance') and so being the ultimate authority in the determination of evil-doing assessed largely by European common law, the District Commissioner becomes the innocent instrument of the disintegration of the traditional social order. By appointing non-traditional officials such as the irresponsible and corrupt court-messengers, and unrepresentative and pompous little tyrants like His Highness Obi Ikedi the First of Okperri, he unwittingly exacerbates the pains of transition from the traditional to the modern order. In the end, social change operates through individuals and if these are evilly disposed or crassly stupid, then the suffering involved in fundamental social and culture change is greatly increased.

It was mentioned at the beginning of this paper that the major conflicts in *Arrow of God* are built around Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Umuaro, who is caught up in the agony of power. Because of the internal divisions within the traditional framework, I have tried to show how Ezeulu's strategy, in his attempt to come to terms with the reality of the colonial presence, is misunderstood, whether wittingly or unwittingly, by both his friends and enemies. Ezeulu is cast in the role of ambiguous character no less by his own fascination with the nature of his power and the temptation to constitute himself into the dispenser of Ulu's will. The discrepancy between what he thinks and what his enemies and friends think are his

motives in trying to reach an accommodation with the colonial presence heightens the strain of ambiguity in Ezeulu.

Because of his superior intelligence, Ezeulu possesses a broad vision and a comprehensive outlook on the world. He is a master of the two opposing worlds, at least he thinks so, and his understanding of the dilemma posed by the conflicting claims of the worlds is epitomized in his remark, 'The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in the same place'. But it is precisely in this strength of broad comprehension that Ezeulu's total weakness lies. In his belief that the mask of the world can actually be seen in its entirety, he forgets that some phases of reality can never be known because of the limited capabilities of man. The ignorance of this fact, as well as the consequence of that ignorance, is inevitable in one form or another. Ezeulu rightly considers the conflict between the forces of tradition and that of the new order brought by the Europeans to be something larger than himself or anybody else — 'it was a fight of the gods', part of a central mystery of which he was but an instrument, the arrow in the bow of his god; but he allows this truth to conceal another fundamental truth, namely, that the instrument of war is not above the conflict. When the gods come to dispense judgement, it is brought by the Chief Priest and falls on him as well.

#### NOTES

1. Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1958). Subsequent page references to the novel will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses at the end of the quotation.
2. G. D. Killam, *The Novels of Chinua Achebe* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1969).
3. Ibid, p. 78.
4. Lewis Nkosi, 'Conversations with Chinua Achebe', *Africa Report*, IX (July, 1964), p. 21.
5. M. J. Melamu, 'The Quest for Power in Achebe's *Arrow of God*', *English Studies in Africa*, XIV (September, 1971), p. 230.
6. Richmond Y. Hathorn, *Tragedy, Myth, and Mystery* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), pp. 46-48 from where I took my interpretation of divine justice.