

Undermining the Sacred: A critical study of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*

Nimmi S
(M.A,M.Phil,NET)

The colonial situation strongly influenced the upbringing, education, and the subject of the fiction of most African novelists. This is certainly true of Achebe as can be seen in the vivid account of his life which appears in his essay, "Named for Victoria, Queen of England." In it he describes his childhood in a village where Christians and non- Christians were clearly divided, where he as a child of devout Christian parents was to look down on "the people of nothing". Being brought up in a Christian family with an instructor father, Chinua was intimately familiar with the ways of the catechists to convert Africans into Christianity.

The fiction of Achebe may be described as the foremost novelistic exploration of law and colonialism in Africa. Debashish Lahiri points out that there are two key areas in *Arrow of God* around which Achebe explores the subjects of law and colonialism. The first of these relates to a land dispute between the villages, Umuaro and Okperi, and the interpretations thereof. The second concerns the issue of indirect rule.

Achebe's *Arrow of God* reveals how the Christian religion was of instrumental use in colonizing African peoples. The novel is set in Southeastern Nigeria in 1922, when British colonization and Christian evangelization were already penetrating every level of Igbo society. For Robert M. Wren, *Arrow of God* helped to fill an important gap of understanding about the complex interaction between British colonial rule and traditional Ibo culture at the turn of the twentieth century. Achebe returns to the period of the intrusion of the colonizer, and the theme of the collapse of the traditional Igbo social order. The narrative focuses on the socio-historical-political engagement between the priest of Ulu, the villages of Umuaro, and the new colonial administration, and particularly explores the relationship between religion and the social order. Margaret Turner argues that the central issue here is more of conflict over the acquisition of power. She points out that there is "no return to the order of morality at the end of the novel, only to an order of power" (35).

Achebe has been celebrated as a prominent post-colonial writer. His novels are said to present on the one hand, a grand narrative of the colonial encounter and, on the other, counter-narratives and fragments of stories of decentred or subaltern groups.

The main theme of the novel is the effort of the priest of the god Ulu, Ezeulu, to cope simultaneously with the adherents of the rival god, Idemili, who holds political power, and the British District Officer, Captain Winterbottom, who is keen to make Ezeulu into his warrant chief in Umuaro. They want to make use of the credibility of Ezeulu. But Ezeulu refuses the chieftaincy. The British officer imprisons him. As revenge, Ezeulu does not eat two sacred yams during the two-moon period of his captivity, and the yam harvest to be called in the name of his God, Ulu, cannot proceed. Umuaro is faced with famine. The Christians offer immediate absolution to those faced with famine, who will not eat the ripe yams from the field lest they incur the wrath of Ulu. They ask the people of Umuaro to bring thank offerings to Christ during the harvest festival, abandoning the God Ulu and his priest. *Arrow of God* has been described as “the richest, most mysterious of Achebe’s novels” (Wren 105). In marked contrast to Achebe’s earlier novel in the trilogy, *Things Fall Apart*, in *Arrow of God* the narrative voices are many and various (C.L. Innes 47-66). *Arrow of God* offers multiple rivalries, interpretations, and points of view. Amongst the British administration, we encounter differing attitudes to modes of rule. Among the inhabitants of the village there are conflicts between the generations, and between Christians

and traditional believers.

Colonialism was a destructive assault on Africa and on the psyche and the self-evaluation of the African. The writer can recreate the past in order to establish the truth of what actually took place, different from the standard expositions of that reality through the European media. Achebe was to write more intensely, after the publication of *Arrow of God*, about this colonial confrontation and the black writer's consciousness of it.

Achebe encouraged readers to approach the text as an attempt to counter colonial representations of Iboland and Nigeria as a cultural void. As a major African postcolonial writer, he has played a significant role in the fight against colonization and in helping his country to regain its African identity. In this novel, Achebe creates a new picture of African religion and also describes the process through which the white missionaries entered Africa and wiped out African religions.

The imperial power uses different ideological instruments to control the colonized peoples indirectly. Based on Althusser's theory, ideological instruments make people accept the power of the ruling class and create people who are willing to be dominated. Education, religion, and media are some of these ideological instruments which have a great influence on the

lives of people (Loomba 32-35). In *Arrow of God*, Achebe depicts the ways in which Christianity is employed as an ideological instrument in the project of colonization. Achebe skillfully portrays the entrance of Christianity and depicts the crisis of African religions shattered by the white missionaries.

Religion brought in its trail economic and social changes. Achebe views the changes from the religious angle. The new religion questioned the very existence of the God and the fundamentals of traditional values. The ritual-judicial system was replaced by the white man's law. The conversion to Christianity had the effect of disarming the community. In a way religion accelerated a social and economic change. The white man, his religion and administration are all realities which the people have come to recognize and they are learning to adjust with the new dispensation. The new religion has existed side by side with traditionalism and winning converts, its school is progressing and the lifestyle of Umuaro changing. The people have come to the painful realization that the white man has come to stay.

Although the African and European worlds of the novel are involved in the problems of power, they misunderstand each other's motives because, in the last resort, they employ different frames of reference. The values of Umuaro are religious; those of the colonial administration secular. This is the

reason why they do not see each other as rivals. No such neutrality is seen in case of missionaries, mainly Igbos. But accepting the God brought by the Europeans, they form an intermediate society between the Africans and the administrators. They are in direct competition with the priests and tribal deities for the loyalty of the people. At first, they seem peripheral to the main events of the novel, impinging only slightly on the major characters. Ezeulu might hear the sounds of their ritual as he engages in his priestly role, but he is not unduly perturbed:

The place where the Christians built their place of worship was not far from Ezheulu's compound. As he sat in his obi thinking of the Festival to the Pumpkin Leaves he heard their bell: GOME, GOME, GOME, GOME. His mind turned from the festival to the new religion. He was not sure what to make of it.

(46-47)

As a precaution he has sent his third son Oduche to join the missionaries. The Christian bell rings in an increasingly peremptory fashion as the divisions between the six villages deepen. The struggles between the competing tribal deities are evidence that Umuaro needs the Christian god.

As Bill Ashcroft and others observe, the entry of Christianity in Africa

was the cause of one of the most important cultural changes in the history of mankind. Its consequences were the spread of cultural and economic hegemony. The imperialist historians have tried to simplify the role of religion in the spread of imperialism. Missions had played a very important role in the spread of colonialism by means of religion. Missionaries would act as intermediaries between indigenous people and the harsh government. The missionaries, besides spreading colonialism, had an important role to play in providing education and literacy for people. The education they provided helped the spread of colonialism. (Ashcroft 128).

One of the important points about postcolonial studies is its growing awareness of the role of religion in the construction and development of colonialism before and after independence. Different branches of Christianity used direct methods like sending missionaries, or indirect methods like reshaping the minds of the people to maintain the practice of colonialism.

Ezeulu is the chief priest of Ulu and he has a very important position among his people and has to make decisions for different occasions in the daily lives of the village people. In fact the significance of religion in that village is entirely different from that of the colonizer. Western scholars remain blind regarding the African's religion. Their only aim is to propagate

their religion. The white Christian world threatens to tear asunder not only the physical and material riches of the land but supplant the very essence of everything that is African.

In the first part of the novel it is seen that the functions of Ezeulu as chief priest are, mainly, religious -- that is, to perform the rituals periodically, offer prayers and sacrifices to the deity on behalf of Umuaro. Besides, he also enjoys the privilege of keeping the agricultural calendar of the community. In this capacity, he names and conducts two important events of Umuaro namely, the festival of Pumpkin Leaves- a ceremony of Purification before plantation -- and the New Yam festival or the Harvest Festival which marks the end of the old year and heralds the new year. Ezeulu is also the guardian and custodian of the community in matters affecting the security and other secular problems of the people.

It seems that Ezeulu has great power in his hands, but when he deeply thinks about his power and the circumstances in which he could use it, he becomes anxious. Within the political and religious structure of Umauro, Ezeulu's power is importantly held in check by the council of elders. His role is no more than that of a watchman. This is unacceptable to Ezeulu. The word "dare" hurled at him as though by an enemy" is in the nature of a challenge to

the ambitious and egocentric priest. He indulges in a sort of internal monologue as to the nature and reality of power vested in him. He wonders what use is power if it is only superficial, elusive and cannot be exercised. If this is what power means, he would rather not have it at all. Ezeulu is caught up in this dilemma and tension arising out of the limitations and the absoluteness of power.

Ezeulu's consciousness of the uncertainty of his power is contrasted in the novel with the approach of the British administration towards him. Whereas Ezeulu perceives his power as one which would never be used⁶, the colonial project requires him to exercise the authority of a warrant chief. The creative misunderstanding, which is necessary for the British to make an administrative chief out of a man who is certain of the limitations of his own spiritual role, is examined in the novel.

Ezeulu identifies himself with Ulu and does not like to share his power with other great men of the village. It is seen that the conflicts in the novel broaden as the plot unfolds. In the dialectic between Ezeulu and Nwaka, the contingency of the former's position as priest of a created god, is immensely important. If, under the threat of the colonizer, Ulu is shown to be ineffective, Nwaka argues then he should be destroyed. As the chief mediator

between the human and the divine, Ezeulu's significance in the clan is far-reaching, but so too is his rivals, on another level. Nwaka is very wealthy, influential and he has won the highest number of titles in Umuaro. He is a famous wrestler and an impressive speaker. The people call him "the owner of words" (45). Besides, he has his "flute player" in Ezedemili. Ezeulu cannot boast of such advantages.

Nwaka wants to start a war and the other priests support him in this. Ezedemili, the god of python also wants him to fight against Ezeulu. When Ezeulu's authority is challenged by the secular forces represented by Nwaka, His strategy is to appeal to his unknowable" nature as a divine witness. At the same time he seeks new forms of connection with the colonizers, including sending his son to learn their obscure wisdom.

Nwaka and the other priests are going to start a war over a piece of land. This is both a political and religious war which will go on for five years. Captain Winterbottom intervenes in the war and settles the dispute in favour of Okperi, which from Ezeulu's perspective is the white man "coming to tell the villagers the truth they knew but hated to hear. It was an augury of the world's ruin" (16).

In addition, the people of Umuaro had a grudge against Okperi,

because its people readily accepted the white missionaries. David Carroll believes that the author wants the reader to have sympathy with Ezeulu. That should be why he depicts the war after talking about issues that challenge Ezeulu's mind and his clash with antagonistic priests (88-123).

In these conflicts, the white administrator also plays a role. When the author describes him, it seems that he is another chief in Umuaro. He is standing in front of his veranda and, through implementing a policy of indirect rule, he is controlling life in the region.

It was interesting that when Captain Winterbottom describes the story regarding the start of the war, it seems somehow to be an altogether different story, because the Captain is narrating the story from his viewpoint which is totally different from that of the Africans. Captain Winterbottom sees both the cause of the war and his intervention differently. He describes the origins of the war:

This war between Umuaro and Okperi began in a rather interesting way. I went into it in considerable detail... this was started because a man from Umuaro went to visit a friend in Okperi one fine morning and after he'd one or two gallons of palm wine... reached for his ikenga and split it in two. (37)

For Winterbottom, the issue of land claims “was the remote cause of all the unrest” (38). Thus we are presented with an altogether different, variation of the „truth“ about the Okperi claim to the land. The land dispute demonstrates both the problems of knowing and perhaps also that it is undesirable to try to settle on one truth. Achebe writes “wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own” (63). This approach to uncertainty is in stark contrast to the quest for certainty of the British administration. The need for political and epistemological control leads the administration into a “creative misunderstanding”. Just as the colonial administration is prepared to deliberately misunderstand the origins of the Okperi- Umuaro rivalry, it also readily misreads the role and purpose of a spiritual chief such as Ezeulu.

After five years of war, the captain goes into the village, breaks the guns and turns into a legend overnight. He wants Ezeulu to cooperate with him in his judgment on a piece of land. As the white administrators are for Okperi, When Ezeulu agrees with them about turning back the land to Okperi, they say that he is the only man to speak the truth and he subsequently becomes famous for “truthfulness”. Consequently Winterbottom builds a friendly relationship with him. In reality the colonizers’ strategy is to pretend that whatever is associated with them is truth and whoever is in agreement with them is truthful. Carroll

believes that “telling the truth” is Ezeulu’s plan to reestablish the greatness of Ulu. This is why when the war is about to start he says that Ulu would not support it and he therefore gains the support of the white men. Captain Winterbottom convinces Ezeulu into sending his son to the church. Actually this is a plan to expand the relationship between Ezeulu and the white missionaries. This plan finds results: first it absorbs a member of Ezeulu’s family into the church; second, it weakens Ezeulu’s power as the chief of an African religion.

One of the necessities of the church was studying the Bible and understanding it. The circulation of the Bible in the vernacular and encouraging common people to study it started with the Protestants. They claimed that the word of the Bible is incorruptible and inspired private reading and thought about it. Through this the Protestants started their work and founded their churches in the colonized countries. They had three plans: first, they tried to eliminate the natives “useless” and “heathen” practices and distributed the Bible as the only savior from their misery and finally they followed their program through ideologically loaded educational and medical institutions. The white man believed that the colonized worshiped some of the characteristics in the people who were ruling over them, so they tried to use different colonial means such as the Bible to supposedly disseminate

these characteristics among the colonized. Finally, as Sugirtharajah points out, the colonized said “at first we have the land and you had the Bible; now we have the Bible and you have the land” (Sugirtharajah106).

Ezeulu’s cooperation with the white administrator along with the sending of his son to the church, make the people of Umuaro think that it is Ezeulu who is responsible for the invasion of the white man. In fact he hopes that his son will be his eye here and report to him about the secrets and wisdom of the white man there by securing the position of his religion and protecting it against the unknown power and knowledge of the white people. The colonized did not go to church for salvation. In fact they had no option, because the only way to wealth and power was through the church and these are the most important attractions of the church for African people (Stirrat 367).

One of the duties of the missionaries was to create a sense of guilt among the natives for their beliefs and way of life and by this way they can accelerate the process of change. They also mixed biblical stories with historical events to generate the belief among natives that the only way to salvation is through the Bible (Stirrat 67). Initially, when Ezeulu wanted Oduche to go to the church he refuses, but after a while he becomes so interested that he wants to gain an excellent command of the English

language and culture. The Bible has shed new light on the lives of native converts. They can interpret every event of their lives through the Bible.

As pointed out, to broaden the scope of the ideological influence of the church, the missionaries portray the values and rituals of the natives as degenerate and evil and try to inject their own values instead. At one point a missionary says that a real Christian is a person who would dare to kill a python. Oduche wants to prove himself, so he volunteers to carry out this act.

To justify his action, he even cites a story from the Bible, "It is not true that the Bible does not ask us to kill the serpent. Did not God tell Adam to crush the serpent which deceived his wife?"(54). Many encourage him, while Moses, another Christian and a man of experience, wants to prevent another clash between Christianity and the African tradition. He speaks against killing a python, but the missionary does not heed his words and in order to encourage Oduche, he tells him that he would give him an honorary name, Peter after Saint Peter. When Oduche traps the python, everybody blame Ezeulu and say that he forced his son to go to the church. What his son commits is considered as an insult to Ezidemili and his God, python. Ezeulu confesses that he had wronged his son, Oduche, by sending him to church. The white men were becoming more powerful, so as to be ready to resist them, the Africans had to know their ways.

This is why Ezeulu wanted his son to be his eyes and ears in the church and learn the ways of the white men. However, he did not think that the instructions of the church could influence his son. He was not sure what to make of it. At first he had thought that since the white man had come with great power and conquest it was necessary that some people should learn the ways of his own deity. That was why he had agreed to send his son, Oduche, to learn the new ritual. He also wanted him to learn the white man's wisdom; for Ezeulu knew from what he saw of Winterbottom and the stories he heard about his people that the whiteman was very wise. But now Ezeulu is apprehensive. He fears that the new religion is like a leper. Ezeulu has already spoken strongly to his son who is becoming a stranger every day. He is not worried about his son alone. What the missionaries are doing in the church is so effective and powerful that it would lead to something else.

Ezeulu is afraid that the prophecy of his gods that white men would take over the land from them is being fulfilled. Hence, he thinks that it would be better to keep his son in church. 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.

As has been discussed, one of the main tasks of the missionaries was to

replace traditional beliefs and values with the Christian ideology. Thus to achieve their purpose, they interpret everything in a way that works to their benefit. In the novel, Ezeulu asks for the meaning of the ringing bells in the church and it is interpreted as the call to Africans to release their own rituals and beliefs and go to church. The bell continues ringing in its sad monotone. Nwafo comes back and asks his father whether he knew what the bell is saying. Ezeulu shakes his head:

“It is saying: Leave your yam, leave your cocoyam and come to church. That is what Oduche say “Yes”, said Ezeulu thoughtfully. It tells them to leave their yam and their cocoyam, does it? Then it is singing the song of extermination.”(46).

One day Akuebue, Ezeulu’s friend, comes to visit him and reminds him about the limitations of his power and the fact that he is still considered responsible for his judgment over the land and for sending his son to church. Again Ezeulu’s concerns about the nature of his power makes him anxious. Meanwhile the direct rule of the colonialist is changing into indirect rule and they are planning to choose a king for each region. It is a hard task in Igboland because there is no central authority there. Captain Winterbottom calls this situation chaos, but actually many African societies had a

dialectical form of life in which a central characteristic was its unitary and collective nature. Choosing a king would turn it to a dictatorship and this was the main purpose of the colonizing country. In any case, Africans felt that there is no escape. They know that with time their customs, values, rituals and identity would be wiped out by the power of white men, and they relate this power to God and in this way justify whatever is going to happen:

As daylight chases away darkness so will the white man drive away all our customs. I know that as I say it now it passes by your ears, but it will happen. The white man has power which comes from the true God and it burns like fire. This is the God about whom we preach every eighth day (85).

When Ezeulu is in prison he thinks about his position and becomes sure that Ulu is using him to take revenge on the people of Umuaro, because they have rejected him. Ezeulu's nightmare foreshadows this situation too; his people call him the priest of a dead god and spit in his face. He understands that to protect the African religion he has to maintain the unity of his own people and then think about the white missionaries. He is offered to be made king, but he rejects the offer and is kept in prison for a longer time. The longer he is kept in prison, the more he is exonerated from guilt.

Therefore, it seems that white men were unwittingly acting as his allies and helping him to appear powerful and determined in his purpose. He wants to prove to his men that he is not responsible for the entry of the white man. After a while his people come to visit him in prison and grow to appreciate him. When he returns to his house the great men of Umuaro visit him and want him to announce the Feast of the New Yam; but he does not. He says that he has three yams left and could not announce the feast before eating them. Ezeulu is aware that if he did not announce the feast, the people would lose their produce, but he is inflexible. His friends say that he is helpless, because he cannot act against Ulu, but his enemies say that he wants to take revenge on them because it is an important day for the people of Umuaro and a time of crisis for himself.

After the entrance of the white missionaries and their administrative authority, relations among the African people gradually weaken. The Africans are divided into two groups (the followers of Ulu and the followers of the Christian God) and as they know that ultimately power is in the hands of the white men they are not willing to keep their unity and are more inclined toward the Europeans. Ezeulu, as the chief priest, thinks that this situation is vital for the African religion, and so decides not to accept his

people's demand. The missionaries of the church, who have been trying to create division and discord among the Africans, take advantage of the crisis and announce that Africans could offer the yams to the Christian God in order to be protected from Ulu's anger. The people of Umuaro are quite happy with the suggestion. So they harvest their yams and offer their gift to the Christian God. In subsequent years they will harvest in the name of the Christian God too.

From the beginning of the novel, there is a tension. On the one hand, Ezeulu is deeply concerned and thinks that the entrance of the white missionaries is a sign of the destruction of African religion. On the other, people of different regions in Africa are losing their unity. The administrators treat Africans unjustly and delegate power only to specific regions and chiefs and this matter leads to discord. Although Ezeulu in one way or another tries to protect the African religion and people against these powers, he is defeated in the end. Not only is Ezeulu's son converted to Christianity, but also all the Africans dedicate their products to the Christian God and become Christian.

Arrow of God closes with the suggestion that Christianity will triumph over the traditional religion of Umuaro. The people themselves do not yet understand that following the humiliation of his priest, god Ulu stands self-

destructured. Ultimately, the death of Umuaro's god also means the death of Umuaro's way of life; the time will come when the people will see what embracing Christianity has done to their culture. The narrator states this directly in the concluding chapter of the novel.

Christianity as an ideological instrument gradually changed the mind of the African people and made them view their religion to be little more than superstition. Ezeulu, the chief of the African religion, lacks the ability to formulate strategies to keep his people united. The white missionaries, who have been trying to create division among Africans and draw them towards Christianity, take advantage of the situation and finally convert most of the Africans. This conversion is not a simple change of religion. It marks a point of deep entrenchment of the white man's hegemony.

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