

**COMMENTS ON MORDAUNT'S ARTICLE;  
ARROW OF GOD REVIEWED.**

**1. Chinua Achebe; an introducton**

Achebe was born on the 16th of November 1930 at Ogidi, a town east of Onitsha. He was the son of a Church Missionary Society catechist. At the age of fourteen he was one of the few to be elected at the Government College at Umuahia. After graduating there he started to study medicine at University College at Ibadan.

After a while he changed topics and started to devote himself to the study of English literature. He stayed in Ibadan from 1948 till 1953 and in this period he published his first writings in the local university paper, the "University Herald" (parts of them were reprinted in 1973 in "Girls at War and other Stories").

After his university education he taught for one year and then embarked on a 12 year carrier at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. During that time, in 1958 to be precise, he published his first novel "Things Fall Apart". This was not only the beginning of his literary life but also the first step towards international recognition of the West-African novel in the English language.

Achebe's role in the development of the African novel in the English language is quite significant. Not only was he one of the first writers to make his appearance on the literary scene but he influenced quite a number of young writers of the next generation. How was this about to happen?

The development of a literary tradition within the Igbo region of Nigeria can be attributed to four intrinsic and historical elements. Namely: slavery, the colonial era, the mission and educational system and internal elements characteristic to the Igbo society which all together formed the background of the development of the literature (for an elaborate discussion of these elements see Bogers 1987).

The first signs of written literature are to be found within the missionary educational system. These examples from their oral tradition were used for

educational purposes. Apart from these there were the inevitable Bible translations used for missionary as well as educational purposes. A second important stimulant towards the creation of a literature was the rise of the Onitsha Market literature.

The Second World War and its aftermath gave rise to the development of a pamphlet kind of literature in the city of Onitsha. First there were several popular newspapers and "they provided a platform for new writers who would not have had the confidence nor the opportunity to be published in the previous decades." (Obiechina 1973: 7).

These newspapers gave rise to an increased distribution of "Indian and Victorian pulpstore pulp magazine fiction which became a model for the pamphlet literature." (Obiechina 1973: 4). From there it was a small step towards the development of an autochthonic version of this kind of literature. Popular and African in content but certainly European in form.

Several writers started their career in publishing these pamphlets and later turned to writing novels. The most famous one among these is Cyprian Ekwensi who made his debut with "When Love Whispers" in 1947.

The reading audience consisted mainly of grammar and elementary school boys and girls, lower level office workers and journalists, primary school teachers, traders, mechanics, taxi-drivers, farmers and the new literates who attend adult education and evening schools. University graduates and people with post-grammar-school education tend to ignore this literature in favour of the more sophisticated novels, drama and poetry. (Obiechina 1973: 10)

In a latter stage, say the 1950ies, we see the rise of the novel in south-east Nigeria and with it were connected two names each representing a different branch within this kind of literature. The urban type, as I would like to call it, with as its main representative Cyprian Ekwensi and the rural type with Chinua Achebe.

Ekwensi finds his inspiration within his direct urban environment; movies, daily city life, detective stories, etc.. Achebe on the other hand returns to the tradition, the history of his people, colonisation and the oral history. His first

novel "Things Fall Apart" gives us the story of a people torn apart by the invasion of colonial rulers. But there is more, Achebe never forgets, in all his works, to point out that change and development were not the sole privileges of the whites. In traditional societies (as far as this word is meaningful in this context) there are changes. There is no such thing as an inert society. People are constantly in a process of adapting and changing themselves to the adjusting questions of organisation and coherence of society. A perfect example of this theme we find back in "Arrows of God", which I will discuss later.

Both writers had more and less successful adepts, who started writing along the literary paths they had created. To the urban type of writing one could include Egbuna with his "The Minister's Daughter" and Ekwuru with his "Going to Storm" and "Songs of Steel". The rural type know people like Elechi Amadi with "The Great Ponds", "The Slave" and "The Concubine", Buchi Emecheta with "The Slave Girl" and Ulasi with "Many Things You No Understand" and "Many Things Begin for Change".

Now let us focus on the work of Chinua Achebe and more specifically on his "Arrow of Gods" (1964, page references are to the 1980 edition). In this part it is not my aim to criticise Ardounts article but rather to enlighten certain elements which are, as far as I am concerned important to understand the structure and meaning of the novel.

## **2. Arrow of God**

"Arrow of God" is Achebe's third novel after "Things Fall Apart" and "No Longer at Ease" (1960). In this novel Achebe returns to the setting of his first novel, cross-references are made throughout the story, namely; a rural village in Igbo country. The story is set after the arrival of the British and the establishment of a mission.

The basic theme of the book is, in my opinion, the mental and physical "décollage" of the town in which Ezeulu serves as a high priest. It is not as much the conflict between religions or the clash between two forms of government, although these are present on several levels. There is also the

conflict between Ezeulu's religious power and the earthly powers of society represented by its members and furthermore there is the internal religious conflict within Ezeulu himself.

Last but not least there is the conflict within the colonial camp. The white administrator Winterbottom is constantly frustrated by the colonial administration who pretends to know more about the situation.

The great tragedy of British colonial administration was that the man on the spot knew his African and knew what he was talking about, found himself constantly being overruled by starred-eyed fellows at headquarters.

(AoG:56)

The refusal of Ezeulu to represent his people and act as a spokesman for his people brings him into conflict with the colonial administration. This administration refuses to accept that there is no centralised power within the Igbo community.

Winterbottom is aware of this problem but bound hands and feet by his administration uses the only and last solution which is available to him, he imprisons Ezeulu. Thus creating a religious problem: the naming of the Yam festival. This brings us to the second level of conflict.

Ezeulu has no earthly powers, he is a priest and chosen by the people. His priestly powers are given and taken by the people.

Their god had taken sides with them against their headstrong and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors - that no man however great was greater than his people; that no one even won judgement against his clan.

(AoG: 230)

In sending his son to the missionaries he is coming into conflict with his role within society. As Mordaunt shows clearly that within Ezeulu's lust to send his son to go and if there is something in the white man's religion and lifestyle to get, there is a breach of norms. Ezeulu's first and only responsibility is the mental/religious well-being of his people. All his other needs

would be the problem of the community, they were responsible for his physical needs and demands.

It is only when Ezeulu chooses and acts accordingly to his own will, that he steps out of the boundaries laid there by his society and of which he is a member. This is the basic conflict, all other conflicts merely set the scene where the action is going on. The "traditional" norms and values have, up till then, adapted themselves to the altering situations. This is mainly so because the villages have as a whole decided as one voice what to do in order to face the changing situations.

In this point I have to disagree with Mordaunt. It is not as much as an internal conflict which brings Ezeulu to his final ordeal but rather his refusal to accept the voice of the people. The conflict Ezeulu faces lies between his own greed and the function he has to perform within society. The role society has bestowed upon him gives him no chance to undertake individual journeys. This, at the end, becomes his destiny, chasing his own thoughts in the world of madness. There and there alone is there space for his own will and actions, society will not take any notice. He is forgotten, ostracised and doomed in the eyes of society.

Ezeulu is compelled to defend his unique position of priest of Ulu, the most powerful of the village deities against, on the one hand, reactionary forces within the tribe and, on the other, against European culture and religion. The former theme is centered in the rivalry between Ezeulu and Nwaka, a wealthy chief and principal supporter of Ezidemili, the chief priest of the god Idemili, one of the deities displaced by Ulu. This rivalry promotes internal division in the tribe.

(Killam 1977:61)

It is rather society which dictates the behavior of its high priest than Ezeulu himself. He is subjected to society's behavior and when he does not pay attention to her signals and codes he is set aside. Taken at a whole Ezeulu's role within society is very limited, he can take action but only within a very specified range within the social context. This becomes very clear at the point where Ezeulu refuses to determine the day of the Yams festival. The society tells him:

"No, you are Umuaro," said Ezeulu.

"Yes, we are Umuaro. therefore listen to what I am going to say. Umuaro is now asking you to go and eat those remaining yams today and name the day of the harvest. Do you hear me well? I said go and eat those yams today, not tomorrow; and if Ulu says we have committed an abomination let it be on the heads of the en of us here."

(AoG:208)

But there is more to the actions Ezeulu undertakes. The sending of his son to the missionaries gives also rise to rumours that Ezeulu is actually planning his succession as a high priest by his son. Again it is not for Ezeulu to plan such a thing.

"But Ulu does not ask if a man's mind is in something or not. If he wants you he will get you. Even the one who has gone to the new religion, if Ulu wants him he will take him."

(AoG:126)

One must realise that the process of "d collage" of the society is not due to arrival of the colonial powers. The initial elements of the breakdown lie much deeper within society itself. The quarrel between Ezeulu's deity and other older deities is not something new. Gods have to earn their right of existence within the community, otherwise they are discarded . An example of this attitude is found within the relationship between Ezeulu and his half-brother.

Okeke Onenyi always said that the reason for the coolness between him and the present Ezeulu, his half-brother, was the latter's resentment to dividing power between themselves. "He forgets," says Okeke Onenyi, "that the knowledge of herbs and anwansi is something inscribed in the lines of a man's palm. He thinks that our father deliberately took it from him and gave it to me.

(AoG:147)

On the other hand there is the imprisonment of Ezeulu and his subsequent absence the village which gives him a certain opportunity to get even with his enemies by not naming the right day for the yams harvest. It is through

the conflict with the colonial forces that Ezeulu clashes with his society but that conflict was already existing, even dormant, before these events.

As long as he was in exile it was easy for Ezeulu to think of Umuaro as one hostile entity. But back in his hut he could no longer see the matter as simply as that. All these people who had left what they were doing or where they were going to say welcome to him could not be called enemies. Some of them - like Anosi - might be people of little consequence, ineffectual, perhaps fond of gossip and sometimes given to malice; but they were different from the enemy he had seen in his dreams at Okperi.

(AoG: 187)

Ezeulu's plan to get even with Umuaro for their lack of support in his fight with the colonial administration does not arise as the result of an inner conflict between his spiritual and earthly side. This plan is the simple result of imprisonment and the lack of support he experiences by his kinsman, drive him towards this action.

After a long period of silent preparation Ezeulu finally revealed that he intended to hit Umuaro at its most vulnerable point - the Feast of the New Yam.

(AoG: 201)

The madness of Ezeulu is the last stage in the process of "décollage" put into the novel by Achebe. It is the inner breaking up of mental and psychological boundaries caused by external forces. Here we witness the ultimate destruction of the principal character.

So in the end only Umuaro and its leaders saw the final outcome. To them the issue was simple. Their god had taken sides with them against his stubborn and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors - that no man however great was greater than his people; that no one ever won judgement against his clan.

(AoG: 230)

The fate of Ezeulu is a tragic one. Tragic in this sense that he is not permitted to live his life according to his own liking. His life is set out by the community and it is the community who determines the behavior of Ulu.

Whether he likes it or not it was the society who created the god and power is given to the people to get rid of their god again. Once Ezeulu forgets this he is destined to face a tragic end.

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