

Ecumenical Implications of the Dismantling of the Ibo Myth in Achebe's *Arrow of God*

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's novel, *Arrow of God*, can be read as an ecumenical statement about how religious people should treat one another. Because it is mostly concerned with what Christians should not do, it can be said that the statement is made negatively. We do get some glimpse throughout the narrative, however, of "what might have been" had the British colonials and the Christian missionaries behaved differently in Nigeria among the Ibo. In this novel, Achebe tells the story of how those Christians and colonials dismantled the myth of the Ibo and began the work of replacing the Ibo mythic system, the rituals, and the social and political systems dependent on that mythic structure, with Christian and Western counterparts.

In this essay I shall recount that part of the story of *Arrow of God* which needs to be known in order to understand what Achebe is doing in the novel. Then I shall pick out from the story some of the more prominent elements of the Ibo myth, ritual, and political system contained therein. I shall also show how the British colonials and the Christian missionaries dismantled that mythic structure. In conclusion I shall discuss the ecumenical implications of the destruction that the British and the Christian missionaries accomplish in the novel.

The Story of Ezeulu

The novel is set in Umuaro, where six villages of the Ibo tribe have banded together. Originally these tribes joined forces to protect themselves against marauding slavers. Now they are protecting themselves and their way of life against the British colonials and the Christian missionaries who have set themselves up to work in Umuaro. The British

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"bible" is a book entitled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. That title reveals their basic attitude of superiority to people they have come to "help". The Christians proceed from the assumption that their Bible is superior to Ibo myth, ritual and symbol, and endows them with the right to replace Ibo religious belief and practices with their own.

Ulu is the most prominent God of Umuaro mentioned in *Arrow of God*, and Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, is the central figure in the book. When the story opens Ezeulu is searching the skies for the new moon, and after a brief search, finds it. That is the signal for him to eat one of the yams he stores in his obi (combination house-office-chapel). When he has eaten all of the yams he will announce the Feast of the New Yam which will be the signal for the Ibo to begin the harvest of the yam. Since the yam is the main source of food and wealth in Umuaro, the announcement of this feast is the most important in their liturgical calendar. If that announcement is delayed too long, for a month or more, the ground could become so hard that harvesting would be impossible and the crop would be lost. Ulu is the god who controls the welfare of the yam and Ezeulu is his watchman, his "arrow".

The head of the British governmental station which has responsibility for the Ibo is Captain Winterbottom. He has developed some respect for Ezeulu, as one native who tells the truth. He has encouraged Ezeulu to cooperate with the British and the black Christian missionaries who have built a church building in Umuaro. Ezeulu has entered into guarded cooperation with that mission and those missionaries by sending his son Oduche to study at the mission and to be his "eyes and ears" there. When he sent Oduche to the mission he told him that

"If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring back my share. The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man will be saying "had we known" tomorrow." (Achebe, 1969, pp. 50-51)

Oduche reluctantly obeys his father but after a short time at the mission he becomes an enthusiastic follower of the head catechist, John Goodcountry. Oduche is much too young and impressionable to carry out the assignment given him by his father. Like Toundi, the young African in Oyono's *Houseboy*, Oduche becomes enamored of white, Christian, European ways and ideas. Oyono sees this development as tragic, such fascination leading youth to a betrayal of "their own community as well as their (own) humanity." (Oyono, 1967, p. 9)

When Captain Winterbottom is instructed by his superiors to appoint a warrant-chief (quasi-king) in Umuaro he chooses Ezeulu as his candidate and sends for him. Ezeulu does not come when summoned but takes time to bring this summons to the attention of all of Umuaro in a vil-

lages meeting. His behavior is interpreted as intransigence by Winterbottom and the British. When he does come to Okperi, Ezeulu is thrown into jail for insubordination at the same moment that Winterbottom is stricken with severe fever. Winterbottom's replacement, Mr. Clarke, contemptuously leaves Ezeulu in prison so that he will "learn his lesson".

While in jail Ezeulu misses two sightings of the new moon from his own obi, which means that the rhythm of the myth and liturgy of Ulu is upset. When the chief priest does return to his own village his advisors come and urge him to eat the yams he missed so as not to delay the Feast of the New Yam and the harvest. Ezeulu takes the matter to Ulu himself in that sacred part of his obi where the underground river runs and casts lots before the god he serves. The cowry string which he uses falls against eating the yams and this is interpreted by Ezeulu to be the will of Ulu.

Ezeulu is rapidly isolated and alienated from his people but remains determined in his course until Obika, his impetuous but wonderful son, dies suddenly as a result of fever and undue exertion in the course of a religious ritual. The people understand this to be Ulu's judgment against Ezeulu, and the chief priest himself cracks mentally under the strain of pressure from his people and the death of Obika.

The unjust and insensitive jailing of Ezeulu by the British sets in motion a series of events which make it possible for the Christian missionaries to exploit the fall of Ezeulu so that they can begin the dismantling of the Ibo myth and way of life. The British are totally unaware of and unconcerned about the close and fragile connection between Ibo myth and the Ibo way of life. The Christian missionaries have more awareness of that connection and its fragility but they are so occupied with its replacement by what they have come to think of as a higher, better way that they do not hesitate to move in for the kill when the opportunity presents itself.

The Mythic Structure of the Ibo

The novel itself provides us with only a partial picture of the Ibo's mythic structure, and the liturgical and political systems that are based on that myth, but that is enough to give us a basic understanding and appreciation of it. In the myth as it is contained in the novel, Chukwu is the high god. He is shown to be the creator god who has a friendly dialogic relationship with his creatures. He is reasonable, approachable, concerned for their welfare, and when he can, is willing to moderate his decisions in favor of giving better human conditions. He is a god whom any thinking and reasonable person would be delighted to have.

In *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Achebe describes how Chukwu created humans through their chis, their spirit alter egos, their other identi-

ties in spirit land. That work of creation was not the work of one moment, or one effort long ago, but rather

There is a process of ongoing dialogue concerning how the earth might be made ever more habitable for Chukwu's creatures. New human needs can lead to fresh discussions and new solutions from Chukwu which work in favor of a better Ibo life.

The sacred yam which is featured so prominently in *Arrow of God* was given by Chukwu to the priest-kings Ezenri and Ezadama, and is a good example of Chukwu's concern for the well-being of his creatures. As described by Northcote W. Thomas,

Ezenri and Ezadama came from heaven and rested on an ant heap; all was water. Cuku (Chukwu) asked who was sitting there and they answered 'We are the kings of Nri and Adama', thereupon Cuku and the kings talked. After some conversation Cuku gave them each a piece of yam; yams were at that time unknown to man, for human beings walked in the bush like animals. (Quoted in Achebe, 1975, p. 102).

Achebe continues:

Later on Chukwu tells Ezenri how to plant and tend the yam but Ezenri complains that the ground is too wet; and Chukwu advises him to send for Awka people—workers in iron—to blow on the earth with their bellows and make it dry. (Achebe, 1975, p. 102).

It is not surprising, then, that the Ibo "held discussion and consensus as the highest ideals of the political process" (Achebe, 1975, p. 103). They are accustomed to being argumentative even with their god. The worth of these democratic aspects of the Ibo's political life go unnoticed by the British colonials who think their politics and religious systems are beneath consideration. The thought that they might have anything to learn from the Ibo's politics does not even occur to the British, any more than it occurs to the Christian missionaries that their relationship with Ezeulu and Ibo religion might be a cooperative one from which Christians could learn something.

Ulu is not the only lesser god in the six villages, nor Ezeulu the only priest. There are other gods and other priesthoods in the various villages but Ulu is the chief god, under Chukwu, and Ezeulu the chief priest of Ulu and of the villages. The lesser god next to Ulu who figures in the story is the rain god Idemili. His priest Ezidemili says of his god:

"Idemili means Pillar of Water. As the pillar of this house holds the roof so does Idemili hold up the raincloud in the sky so that it does not fall down. Idemili belongs to the sky and that is why I, his priest, cannot sit on bare earth. And that is why when I am buried I am not buried in the earth, because the earth and the sky are two different things. (Achebe, 1969, p. 46)

The symbol of Idemili is the royal python, which also figures prominently in the story. Two of these royal animals lived a protected existence in the household of Ezeulu. They come especially to our notice when one of them is attacked by Oduche at the instigation of John Goodcountry.

The mythic structure of the Ibo is the basis of their political behavior,

as we can notice in the town meeting type of discussions the six villages enter into whenever any important matter has to be decided. That same structure is also the basis of their liturgical year and liturgical life. Each sighting of the new moon is a time of celebration for the people, and the Feast of the New Yam, as indicated, is their most important feast. The Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves is a lesser feast but gets more notice in the novel. This Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves is a public ceremony of reconciliation, an annual penance rite. It is a time for tribal forgiving and forgetting, a time for beginning anew.

On the Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves Ezeulu paints himself half white and retells in dramatic, dialogic form the myth of Ulu and how he came to be chief god in Umuaro. He then proceeds to an open area brandishing the staff of his authority. When he enters the compound the women surrounding it throw pumpkin leaves into the circle so that Ezeulu can dance on them and thereby exterminate the evils of the past year and prepare the way for new beginnings. Achebe's description of this scene reveals the power and excitement of an Ibo myth and ritual rich in participation and excitement:

Ezeulu looked around again at all the men and women of Umuaro, but saw no one in particular. Then he pulled the staff out of the ground, and with it in his left hand and the Mother of Ofo in his right he jumped forward and began to run round the market place.

All the women set up a long, excited ululation and there was renewed jostling for the front line. As the fleeting Chief Priest reached any section of the crowd the women there waved their leaves round their heads and flung them at him. It was as though thousands and thousands of giant, flying insects swarmed upon him. (Achebe, 1969, p. 82)

The power and beauty of the liturgical life of the Ibo is also demonstrated in various places in the novel by their prayer. Early in the novel, after he sights the new moon and eats one of the sacred yams, Ezeulu prays:

Ulu, I thank you for making me see another new moon. May I see it again and again. May this household be healthy and prosperous. As this is the moon of planting may the six villages plant with profit. May we escape danger in the farm—the bite of a snake or the sting of the scorpion, the mighty one of the scrubland. May we not cut our shinbone with the machet or the hoe. May our wives bear male children. May we increase in numbers at the next counting of the villages so that we shall sacrifice a cow and not a chicken as we did after the last New Yam feast. May children put their fathers into the earth and not fathers their children. May good meet the face of every man and every woman. May good come to the land of the riverain folk and to the land of the forest peoples. (Achebe, 1969, pp. 6-7)

Ogoye, one of Ezeulu's wives, also prays with power and beauty at the Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves. She addresses Ulu:

Great Ulu who kills and saves, I implore you to cleanse my household of all defilement. If I have spoken it with my mouth or seen it with my eyes, or if I have heard it

with my ears or stepped on it with my foot or if it has come through my children or my friends or kinsfolk let it follow these leaves. (Achebe, 1969, p. 83)

These ceremonies and prayers of the Ibo compare favorably with anything we can find in Western sacramentaries and prayer books; they seem warmer, earthier, more colorful and even more meaningful than most of our collects. To my mind, they are equalled in warmth and power only by some of the psalms of the Hebrew Bible and prayers of the American Indians. Westerners could learn from these prayers and ceremonies. Failing that, they could at least treat respectfully people who can behave with such significance.

When Mr. Clarke summons Ezeulu to his presence no such respect is evident in his attitude. He expects Ezeulu to be profoundly grateful, "savage" that he is, for the honor about to be bestowed upon him. Clarke, like all colonials and missionaries of the novel, has no suspicion that the offer to make Ezeulu warrant-chief is an affront to his religious and political beliefs. Clarke's cynical ignorance and Ezeulu's quiet dignity is captured in the following exchange between them:

"Well, are you accepting the offer or not?" Clarke glowed with the I-know-this-will-knock-you-over feeling of a benefactor.

"Tell the white man that Ezeulu will not be anybody's chief, except Ulu."

"What?" shouted Clarke. "Is the fellow mad?"

"I tink so sah," said the interpreter.

"In that case he goes back to prison." Clarke was now really angry. What cheek! A witch-doctor making a fool of the British Administration in public! (Achebe, 1969, p. 196)

Dismantling the Ibo Myth

In *Arrow of God*, this dialogue between Clarke and Ezeulu sets the scene for the dismantling of the Ibo mythic structure and much of the way of life associated with it. The fall of Ezeulu then triggers John Goodcountry's launching of total war against African native religion from his stronghold in the Christian mission. Neither the colonials nor the missionaries have any respect for the myths of Chukwu, Ulu, Idemili, Eru, and the other Ibo gods, nor do they think it is of any importance to sustain, protect, or develop the liturgical year, the symbols and prayers of Ibo life, or the democratic processes of their political system. In their ignorance the colonials and missionaries act to destroy the Ibo way of life without any recognition of the value of what is being destroyed.

When we first encounter John Goodcountry in *Arrow of God* he is attacking the symbolism of the royal python. He is encouraging his converts and catechumens to imitate the early Christians of the Niger delta who fought against what Goodcountry considers the bad customs of their people by destroying shrines and killing the sacred iguana. John Good-

country challenges them.

If we are Christians, we must be ready to die for the faith. . . . You must be ready to kill the python as the people of the rivers killed the iguana. You address the python as Father. It is nothing but a snake, the snake that deceived our first mother, Eve. If you are afraid to kill it do not count yourself a Christian. (Achebe, 1969, p. 52)

He calls on them to attack the symbol of the god Idemili as the first action in the war he is waging against Ibo religion.

Some opposition to Goodcountry's plan is manifested by Moses Unachukwu, second in command at the mission. Moses was the first convert to Christianity from the six villages of Umuaro. He had spent ten years away from his village in the city of Umuaro. He had spent ten years away from his village in the city of Onitsha, where he became a carpenter and a Christian. Besides carpentry and Christianity Moses also picked up a spirit of independent thought in Onitsha, where Goodcountry's type of singlemindedness was not highly regarded. Onitsha thrived on opposites, and as Achebe says of it:

It was both a cradle of christianity in Igboland and a veritable fortress of "pagan" revanchism. (Achebe, 1975, p. 91)

Moses is from the village which carried or supported the priesthood of Idemili so he is familiar with the royal python. His challenge to Goodcountry opens up a line of argument which could have resulted in the cooperation of the Christian mission with Ibo mythology and religion had it been able to develop and succeed. Arguing from the Bible and the myths of Umuaro, Moses tells Goodcountry and the assembled faithful that ". . . neither the Bible nor the catechism asked converts to kill the python." (Achebe, 1969, p. 53) Moses tells them all the legend of how the now extinct seventh village of Umuaro was wiped out because six brothers from that village killed a sacred python and ate it. As a consequence of this act they quarrelled violently and the fighting spread to the whole village, with the result that the village was emptied and abandoned. Lest a similar fate befall them, killing the sacred python was forbidden by the other six villages, Moses told Goodcountry and the rest.

Goodcountry counterattacks vigorously enough to win the argument and the assent of his converts, including Oduche, son of Ezeulu. Goodcountry is so successful that Oduche goes to his compound and puts one of the two pythons who enjoys sanctuary there into a box (made by Moses) with the intention of suffocating the animal. Ezeulu notices the commotion of the python thrashing about and releases it just prior to suffocation. The word of this sacrilege goes out among the villages, further discrediting Ezeulu for allowing his son to associate with the Christians.

As a result of Ezeulu's refusal to eat the two missed yams the Ibo are now faced with failures of the yam crop. When it became quite clear

that Ezeulu would not be declaring the Feast of the New Yam at the usual harvest time, a member of the Christian mission asks Goodcountry if he could tell his heathen brethren to bring their offertory yam to church instead of to Ulu. Goodcountry tells him they should bring not just one yam but many.

Let them bring as many as they wish according to the benefits they received this year from God. And not only yams, any crop whatsoever or livestock or money. (Achebe, 1969, p. 246)

The man was puzzled how he could break this news to his people since their custom was to give only one yam. At this point Moses Unachukwu abandons his sensitivity to Ibo myths and symbols and enters the battle on the side of Goodcountry. He says:

If Ulu who is a false god can eat one yam the living God who owns the whole world should be entitled to eat more than one. (Achebe, 1969, p. 246)

This brings the missionaries to the stage which the people of Umuaro refer to as "kill and take the head." They are about to defeat and destroy Ibo mythology and replace it with their own religious systems. At one point Moses could say that:

Nobody here has complained to you that the python has ever blocked his way as he came to church. (Achebe, 1969, p. 55)

But now he is no longer disposed to defend the mythic structures and symbols of his people. John Goodcountry and Moses Unachukwu set about the dismantling of the Ibo myths by identifying the python as a symbol of evil and by turning the Feast of the New Yam into an enterprise of commercial gain for the mission.

The Ibo who once brought one yam to Ulu at the time of harvest are now encouraged to bring many yams to offer to the Christian God, and livestock and money as well. The implications are that they will soon be called upon to offer themselves and their families as well and to assent to the evil character of their own religious past. They will be called upon to destroy their own myths, rituals, symbols and political systems in favor of Christian mythic systems which may or may not meet their needs.

Ecumenical Implications in Arrow of God

In *Arrow of God* Achebe shows that the relationship of the British colonials and the Christian missionaries to the native Ibo religion was not ecumenical and did not proceed from ecumenical dispositions. If by ecumenism is understood that disposition which deals with other religions and religionists with respect and understanding, the attitudes of the British colonials and the Christian missionaries were clearly not ecumenical. As Gerald Moore points out, *Arrow of God* is ". . . a study of

the process by which colonialism and Christian proselytism triumphed." (Moore, 1980, p. 134) The colonial and Christian presence and conduct was more like that of an occupying army than that of a group seeking understanding and cooperation.

G.D. Killam puts the case even more forcefully. At the beginning of the story, he says, the religion and politics of the Ibo are intact; a way of life and living are agreed upon between them. He says:

At the end, Ibo society is smashed and an important part, perhaps the finest part is lost. (Killam, 1980, p. 83)

It is Achebe's treatment of this "finest part" of Ibo thought and life which makes the novel an important ecumenical document. Achebe shows that missionary activity should not be understood merely as a process of conversion from one religion to another, but that it involves a destructive quasi-military (warfare) kind of activity. In the case of native religion, where religion is a total way of life, this warfare destroys the mythic structure on which the society is built.

That "finest part" which comes under attack in the novel from colonials and Christians is, as already noted, the myth of Chukwu which supports and promotes a dialogic, humanistic relationship to God in Ibo religion and politics. That "finest part" also includes the richness of lesser gods, their symbols, priesthood and rituals, the liturgical year with its feasts and prayers, as well as the social and ethical systems involving courtship, marriage, hospitality, marketing and market days, sharing of goods, care of the sick, death and burial, and many other customs and practices which made up the Ibo way of life, all of which were based on their mythic structure.

The question Achebe asks is one of considerable ecumenical importance. When the colonials and the Christians "triumphed" (Moore) over the Ibo mythic and political structures, did they in fact replace those symbols and structures with ones of equal humanistic worth and power? It is assumed in Christian circles that such is the case, but when we take a look at the dialogic relationship of the Ibo with their high God and its various social and political ramifications, can we take that for granted? Or even if we could, does a sound ecumenism support the "smashing" (Killam) of religion and culture not our own?

Ecumenism among Christian and some other Western religions is often understood to be the quest for unity, so that it becomes identified with various kinds of mergers and assimilations of one group by another more powerful group. Achebe has other ideas about what genuine ecumenism would be. In *Arrow of God* he fashions his hero Ezeulu as an ecumenical model to show us what he has in mind concerning a genuine ecumenical disposition and approach. He also gives us one other brief glimpse, in Moses Unachukwu's reaction to the call by John Goodcoun-

try for the destruction of the royal python. But only Ezeulu retains his genuine and expansive ecumenism to the end of the novel, even though it costs him his sanity. He is the only "ecumenical" person in the novel.

Ezeulu is willing to cooperate with the British and with the Christian mission. Captain Winterbottom recognizes his good will, his integrity, his cooperative spirit, which is the reason he chooses him to be the warrant-chief of his people. But Winterbottom is not willing to treat Ezeulu as an equal, and Ezeulu needs that recognition in order to fulfill his own mission as the chief priest of Ulu. He is jailed without cause, provided with no explanation or counsel, treated like a savage by Winterbottom's second in command, Mr. Clarke, and blocked from carrying out his priestly and family duties.

He sends his son Oduche to the Christian mission as an observer and go-between. The missionaries treat him as a catechumen and set about subverting him from loyalty to his own religion and his own people. Ezeulu remains steadfast in his determination to cooperate even after Oduche's attempt to smother the royal python. No attempt is made by the missionaries to deal with Ezeulu as a colleague or an equal, or even to recognize his cooperation. He and his religious ways are marked for destruction and elimination as the goal of the mission.

During the Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves Ezeulu is established by Achebe as a symbol of the kind of ecumenical disposition Africa and Christian religion needs. He paints himself half-white so that when he dances the dance of reconciliation over the pumpkin leaves he can be understood as a figure and force which could bring black and white religions together. How should religionists have interacted then and now, according to Achebe? Let them look to noble Ezeulu for their model. He would destroy no one's myth or ideology. He would only learn from it to the benefit of himself and his people.

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