



**The People as Repository of Power: An Exploration of the Democratic
Impulse in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God***

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Abstract

In spite of the avalanche of scholarly discourse which have centered into Achebe's *Arrow of God*, not much, if at all, has been written about the democratic paradigm underlining the work. Indeed, most perspectives on the thematic thrust, for instance, of the work, have focussed on the tensions arising from the sundry manifestations of cultural conflicts therein. This paper undertakes a material reinterpretation of the novel with a view to underscoring or rebutting the thesis that *Arrow of God* is as much a novel of cultural conflicts as it is a denunciation of dictatorship and self-service. With a socio-linguistic examination of the work as a point of departure flavoured by an interdisciplinary mindset, this paper contends that *Arrow of God* is a testament to the imperative of democracy as well as a humanistic blueprint for the subversion of tyranny. With the tragedy of the protagonist of the novel (Ezeulu) who is the depository of the spiritual and temporal powers of the community, the truism that democracy thrives on separation of powers, is amply validated. It is hoped that this paper will provide a new vista and fresh perspective towards the appreciation of the artistic vision that informed *Arrow of God*.

Keywords: Democracy (democratic), tyranny, dictatorship, people, power, culture, conflict.

Introduction

Much of the thrust of post-colonial discourse has centred on the nature and effect of colonialism on the African mental and geographical landscape. Very often, attempts to audit Africa's colonial experience have found expression in two broad perspectives on post-coloniality to wit: the Eurocentric, and the Afro-centric positions. Expectedly, such contending tendencies have also conditioned the parameters for the appraisal of literary works by writers of African extraction *vis- a- viz* the role of the writer in the society. While there

is hardly any dispute that *Arrow of God* constitutes a profound intervention in and interrogation of Africa's colonial heritage, there is, understandably, no consensus as to the interpretation of the work. Having regard to the critical opinions of many scholars such as Moore (1964), Egejuru (1980), Innes (1990), Lindfors (1991), among others, there is little doubt that the preponderance of explicatory perspectives on the novel is to the effect that it dramatizes the conflicts arising from cross-cultural contact. In this regard, Eustace Palmer's (1979) thematic taxonomy of the work seems to represent the popular view on the subject when he states that "*Arrow of God* is essentially a novel of conflict". He further outlines the conflicts as follows:

There is the conflict between traditional authority and the white administration; there is the conflict between traditional religion and Christianity; there is the conflict between Umuaro and Okperi; there are minor jealousies and rivalries among Ezeulu's wives and sons; there is even a conflict within Ezeulu himself, between his own inclinations and the will of his god; essentially a debate about the limitation of his power; but above all there is the conflict within traditional society in the struggle for power between Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu and his opponents, and rivalry between his deity and theirs (Palmer, 85).

Much as these conflicts cumulatively embody the thematic strand that runs through the entire work, the point of departure of this paper is that the protagonist (Ezeulu) is not only the personification of conflicts but more importantly, that the most crucial conflict in the novel is between Ezeulu and the people. This is coterminous with the primeval conflict between authoritarianism and the popular will. We submit that in the victory of the people over the tyrant lies Achebe's democratic impulse which has been given eloquent ventilation in the novel.

As a political concept, democracy stems from Greek origins embodying two words: "demos" which means people or citizens and "kratos" which means power or rule. By coupling the two words, democracy then refers to people's power or citizens rule. It follows, therefore, that the term,

democracy, will be meaningless if the people are taken out of the equation. As Thomas Magstat and Peter Schotten (1988:78) have stated:

In democracies, the people directly or through their chosen representatives regularly indicate their political preferences. Democratic government, therefore mean popular government... the people are directly responsible for their nation's political well-being.

That the people constitute the fulcrum upon which democracy revolves is given eloquent expression by the former US President Abraham Lincoln in the famous Gettysburg Address when he defined democracy as “the government of the people by the people and for the people” to underscore the fact that the people are the centre and circumstance of this form of government. In effect, democratic practice is based on the notion of human dignity arising from the belief that the people are worthy of respect by their very nature.

Using a socio-linguistic examination of the work as its point of departure and flavoured by an interdisciplinary mindset, this paper argues that the political structure of Umuaro and by extension the Igbos of Nigeria, is democratic in nature. It is submitted that the people's republican heritage constitutes the life blood of their democratic praxis and that the major conflict in the novel is traceable to the dictatorial tendencies of the spirito-political leader which are manifestly counter majoritarian. This paper, therefore, contends that *Arrow of God* is a testament to the imperative of democracy as well as a humanistic blueprint for the subversion of tyranny.

Theoretical Underpinning

If the corpus of literary studies and their attendant criticism have anything in short supply, it is not a shortage of perspectives as to the ontological goal of the subject matter. While it would be unproductive, for the task on hand, to attempt a rehash of the contending theories of literature, there seems to exist a consensus that the concerns of literature cannot be insulated from the existential imperatives that occasioned it. Conceptually speaking, the notion that literature must be socially responsible is at the root of the pragmatic orientation otherwise known as the affective theory of literature which holds, as T.S Eliot (1973) has argued, that a work of art is the product

of the intercourse of the emotional and experiential resources of the artist on one hand and the vagaries of social and environmental factors of the community on the other hand. The corollary of the pragmatic orientation is that a literary creation must necessarily impact on the environment, people and society under which it is created.

Frequently, Plato's postulation in "The Republic" is often regarded as the philosophical ferment of the pragmatic orientation. In this respect, following his appraisal of the diverse tendencies of the poets, he elects to banish most of them from the republic while retaining only those whose works would serve the ends of the state. It is in this regard, therefore, that an informed insight may be gained by appreciating Harry Levin's (1988) assertion that "the relationship between literature and society are reciprocal. Literature is not only the effect of social causes, it is also the cause of social effect".

Historically, pragmatism is a philosophical tradition which began in the United States of America about 1870. Charles Sanders Peirce is considered as its founder. According to William James (1909) "pragmatism considers thought as an instrument or tool for prediction, problem solving and action, and rejects the idea that the function of thought is to describe, represent, or mirror reality". Adherents of the pragmatic orientation contend that the indices for measuring most philosophical subjects are their practical utility and applicability. Generally, the philosophy of pragmatism (2014:76) "emphasizes the practical application of ideas by acting on them to actually test them in human experiences".

Apart from Peirce, other 20th century theorists such as William James, John Dewey, Chauncey Wright and George Herbert Mead have also contributed in shaping the direction of pragmatism. In literary history, John Dewey's work: *Art as Experience* is regarded as one of the earliest exemplars of pragmatism owing to the attempt to foreground the linkage between art, culture and daily living. Viewed as a departure from the transcendental approach to aesthetics which was given fillip by Immanuel Kant's thesis that art must be distinguished from artistic appreciation, Dewey emphasizes that the audience is an active participant in a literary production rather than a passive recipient of same.

In the African literary scene, the concept of commitment in literature is regarded as an outgrowth of the pragmatic orientation which has eventuated the widely held notion that an African literary artist cannot, and should not, be insulated from the social temper and prevalent tensions arising from

Africa's colonial experience, economic conditions and other existential concerns. This explains why the formalistic concept of art for art's sake has come to be regarded as an unnecessary luxury which the continent can ill-afford.

Chinua Achebe, for instance, insists that an artist must be socially responsible positing that the novelist must don the toga of a pedagogue. In a telling contribution to the debate on the goal of literature, Achebe states that “art for arts' sake is like a deodorized dog, shit”. In his essay, “The Novelist as a Teacher”, Achebe (1988) makes his position quite clear as follows:

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done... I for one, would not wish to be excused. I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past-with all its imperfections-was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans, acting on God's behalf, delivered them (30).

In view of the foregoing, it is no conjecture, to state that like other *engaged* artists of African extraction, an undercurrent of social activism runs through Achebe's fictional vision. Consequent upon the foregoing, our examination of the democratic impulse in *Arrow of God*, would be conducted within the ambit of the pragmatic theoretical orientation.

The Portrait of the Protagonist as a Dictator

In a nutshell, *Arrow of God (AOG)* is the story of a people's relationship with their god, the agony of the priest and protagonist (Ezeulu) who is the custodian and symbol of the deity (Awoonor: 1978). It is also a parabolic commentary on the attempt by humankind to deal with the socio-economic and cultural tensions that arise from the clash of cultures as well as the ambitions and foibles of those saddled with the task of leadership. Ezeulu-the Chief Priest of Ulu, the guardian deity of all the six villages of Umuaro stands tall as a man of pride and integrity. As the custodian of the people's social and metaphysical symbol of existence-Ulu – he has the onerous responsibility of delimiting not only the dynamics of the people's agrarian calendar, but also mediating between them and their god as well as

contending with certain critical challenges arising from the people's social intercourse. He is a powerful man indeed being "half man and half spirit" (AOG,133). As a disciplinarian, Ezeulu rules his family with an iron hand. As a man of integrity, he does not cower in telling the truth no matter whose ox is gored. This accounts for his taking the side of the enemy in the celebrated land dispute between his people (of Umuaro) and the people of Okperi. As a carrier and guardian of the Ulu deity, he religiously discharges his responsibilities to his god and his people, propitiating the land as and when necessary. As a calculative, foresighted and philosophical leader, he appreciates the inevitability of change accounting for his amenability to the alien religion, Christianity.

However, while Ezeulu may be many things, he is also human. As a human being, he is given to the foibles and discomfitures of ordinary mortals. As a proud and arrogant man, he brooks no debate or opposition. As an imperial and authoritarian figure, he seeks to impose his will on the people. As a vindictive and vengeful man, he seeks to exact premium punishment from his people for any perceived infraction. As an ambitious and self-conceited man, he seeks to appropriate the powers of the deity, Ulu. A deep reading of the novel reveals that Ezeulu is a bundle of contradictions. Perhaps, this is only understandable given that two diverse entities are at work in his personality namely the spiritual and temporal dimensions to his physiological constitution.

Instructively, Ezeulu sets off the tragic events that destroy him as he obstinately stands against the people's interest, by closing his ears to their popular outcry. As a window to Ezeulu's personality and his appreciation of the enormity of his powers, he often wondered whether "the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the people... was real" (AOG, 3). Arising from the immensity of his power, Ezeulu becomes arrogant and haughty and begins to act like an imperial figure. To lend credence to the maxim that absolute power corrupts absolutely, Ezeulu seeks to combine his ecclesiastical role as chief priest with other temporal functions thereby making nonsense of the concept of separation of powers which is the hallmark of democracy. Like a contemporary opposition figure voicing the concerns of his constituents, Nwaka, who represents the critical voice of dissent, is forced to express the people's apprehension over Ezeulu's imperial and dictatorial bearing. He insists on the need to ensure separation of powers. According to him: "the man who carries a deity is not a king. He is there to perform his god's ritual and to carry sacrifice to him. But I have been

watching this Ezeulu for many years. He is a man of ambition; he wants to be king, priest, diviner, all...." (AOG,27).

The implication is that although the duties of Ezeulu the Chief Priest are clearly outlined, his vaulting ambition, however, pushes him to appropriate and perform extra-spiritual functions.

Like all dictators, Ezeulu brooks no debate or argument whether at the family level or in the public domain. We notice his dismissal of his wife's (Ugoye's) protests in not being consulted by Ezeulu before sending their son Oduche to the white man's school and religion. Reacting to Ugoye's disquiet that her son Oduche "should be chosen for sacrifice to the white man", Ezeulu simply dismisses her complaints with a scornful query: "how does it concern you what I do with my sons?" (AOG, 46) as if Ugoye is not a stakeholder in her son's parental project. It is clear that Ezeulu does not care about the maternal anxiety of Ugoye (about her son) in much the same way that he does not care about the opinions and anxieties of the larger people of Umuaro on matters that touch and concern their existence. In banal parlance, it may be said that Ezeulu is both insensitive and full of himself.

Furthermore, on the crucial issue of going to Okperi to answer the summons of the white man-Winterbottom, Ezeulu again displays his tyrannical and dictatorial single-mindedness. Although he has perfunctorily directed the Ikolo to summon the people to the community's meeting ground-Nkwo-to deliberate on the issue, he later confesses that this meeting is a mere formality for the reason that he has already decided what to do even before calling the meeting. He says: "Now, as for what I shall do, I had set my mind on it before I asked Ikolo to summon you" (Achebe, 145). This is obviously an off-handed public insult on the people but this is not surprising because Ezeulu is not a democrat, so he does not place much premium on consultation which is the anchor point of democracy. He follows up his scant regard for public opinion by rejecting the popular suggestion that he should be accompanied to Okperi to see Winterbottom by six elders of Umuaro (AOG,144).

At this juncture, it is essential to reiterate that the Chief Priest of Ulu and leader of Umuaro acts the way he does because he does not recognize the limitations of his office. It is noteworthy that in spite of his far reaching powers, they derive from the people who not only invest him with their mandate but also set out the limitations for their investiture. In this regard, the festival of the pumpkin leaves is most significant in that it underscores

the dialogic and democratic nature of power conferral by the people on their leader. It is noteworthy that during this festival, all the people of Umuaro gather at the Nkwo market ground. Apart from their active participation in various activities during the festival, we remark that Ezeulu is also treated as the carrier figure for the entire community. Through the narrative voice, we are told that “as the fleeing Chief Priest reached any section of the crowd the women there waved their leaves round their heads and flung them at him.” (AOG,27). This performance shows that both physically and spiritually, Ezeulu's powers derive from and remain at the instance of the people. In effect, “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 it. He was merely a watchman” (AOG, 3). It speaks volumes of his dictatorial tendency that Ezeulu does not want to be a mere watchman, he would rather appropriate all the substantive and institutional powers of the community to himself.

For this reason, he attempts to encroach on the functions of the gods by scheming to have a hand in selecting his successor in the person of his favourite son Nwafo (AOG,4). This is happening in spite of the fact that the issue of succession to the office of Chief Priest is, so to speak, within the exclusive legislative list of Ulu, the deity. Even his eldest son, Edogo recognizes that his father is overreaching himself and overstepping his bounds when he muses: “the priest wanted to have a hand in the choice of his successor. It was what anyone who knew Ezeulu would expect him to do” (AOG, 92). From his discerning biological son who knows his father rather well, the verdict is unmistakable that overreaching is in Ezeulu's character. His attempt to select and impose a successor on the people without regard to due process is symptomatic of the tendency of many African leaders to truncate orderly succession for their selfish interests.

Tragically, it is difficult to redeem Ezeulu because he does not brook dissent. This testimonial comes from no less a person than Ezeulu's eldest son, Edogo. Accordingly, “he (Edogo) remembered what his mother used to say when she was alive, that Ezeulu's only fault was that he expected everyone – his wives, his kinsmen, his children, his friends and even his enemies to think and act like himself. Anyone who dared to say no to him was an enemy”. (AOG,92). Clearly, therefore, Ezeulu does not accept “no” for an answer. He is a quintessential dictator ill-suited for a democratic and republican society such as Umuaro.

It is instructive to note that having gauged the public temper over the happenings in Umuaro, Ezeulu's best friend, Akuebue counsels him on the

need to be more sensitive and responsive to the people's feeling confessing that "what troubles me is what the whole clan is saying" (AOG,131). Characteristically, Ezeulu fires back, "who tells the clan what it says? What does the clan know?" (AOG,131). The simple and undemocratic implication is that Ezeulu believes that the clan, the entire clan, does not know anything. Symbolically, it means that Ezeulu arrogates to himself the status of communitarian omniscience. Parabolically, this is another encroachment on the domain of god, the only all knowing entity, indicating, as a result, that Ezeulu pays scant regard to the democratic principle of separation of powers. Regarded as one of the most profound ideas of Western political thought, the concept of separation of powers is traceable to an English political thinker, John Locke who, in his work, "Second Treatise of Civil Government" posited that liberty and good government are hardly realizable with the investiture of all powers in the same persons or organs. According to him, "it may be too great a temptation to human frailty, apt to grasp at power, for the same persons who have the power of making laws to have also in their hands that power to execute them". From Locke's revolutionary conception followed Montesquieu's far-reaching exegesis now known as the doctrine of separation of powers along with its collateral concept: "checks and balances". In his work, "The Spirit of Laws", Montesquieu (2006) averred that:

Political liberty is to be found only when there is no abuse of power. But constant experience shows us that every man invested with power is liable to abuse it, and to carry his authority as far as it will go...To prevent this abuse, it is necessary from the nature of things that one power should be a check on another....(50)

Consequent upon the above, by embodying the spiritual and temporal powers of Umuaro, Ezeulu's powers seem absolute and expectedly, absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Furthermore, we notice that increasingly, Ezeulu begins to act as one above the people, begins to think that being Chief Priest confers divinity on him, scorns the people's feelings and assaults their sensibilities. As the people voice their concerns that Oduche's (Ezeulu's son's) attempt to asphyxiate the python is an act of desecration of the land, he dismisses their concern and stresses that the power to adjudge whether or not an act is a desecration of the land lies exclusively with him. He queries, "who is to say when the land is

desecrated, you or I?" (AOG,134).The import of this is that slowly but steadily, Ezeulu continues to slide into absolute tyranny as he believes that he is the sole determinant of what constitutes good or evil. It would appear, therefore, that in addition to the people of Umuaro, the deity-Ulu has also come to the realization that Ezeulu is sliding into absolute tyranny and decides to issue him a cautionary note. As Ezeulu decides to fight his people to exact maximum punishment from them for his travails in Okperi, Ulu steps in with a warning:

Ta! Nwanu! Barked Ulu in his (Ezeulu's) ear, as a spirit would in the ear of an impertinent human child. 'Who told you that this was your own fight?'... I say who told you that this was your own fight to arrange the way it suits you....? (AOG,191)

Instead of seeing himself as an "impertinent child", as Ulu does, Ezeulu refuses to heed Ulu's warning. This passage, without doubt, prefigures and foreshadows his destruction, for if Ezeulu is both anti-god and anti-people, what would save him?

Intimations of Inconsistency

Although Ezeulu would like to see himself as a man of principle and integrity, his double standards and inconsistencies strongly vitiate such assumption. We note that, arising from his paternal apprehensions about the misbehaviours of his son Obika, he admonishes him to curb his excess drinking and fiery temper pointing out that, "we often stand in the compound of a coward to point at the ruins of where a brave man used to live. The man who has never submitted to anything will soon submit to the burial mat". (AOG,11). It is ironical that Ezeulu is appreciative of the imperative of compromise in the scheme of human relations as per the need to occasionally give in or submit to other people's point of view. However, he himself would not apply the same principle at a critical time when the entire people of Umuaro passionately appeal to him to save them from extinction. Ezeulu appears to be engaged in doublespeak. Symbolically, he would soon reap the fruits of his undemocratic tendencies and anti-people obstinacy because as he unwittingly confessed, "the man who has never submitted to anything will soon submit to the burial mat".

Again, Ezeulu's inconsistency is given renewed ventilation in Obike's humiliation of Ibe for which Ezeulu refuses to accept that his son is wrong in his disrespectful treatment of his in-laws. Instead, "Ezeulu tried to placate them without admitting that his son had done anything seriously wrong" (AOG,12). This is not only an act of doublespeak but also an act of vacillation and ambivalence. He attempts to placate his in-laws indicating that he knows they were wronged but fails to admit that his son has done wrong.

This inconsistency and ambivalence constitute major strands that run through Ezeulu's character. Furthermore, in Oduche's attempt to suffocate the python in the box, we learn that it is motivated by the desire to take an action without taking responsibility for it. The authorial voice informs us that "he (Oduche) felt a great relief within. The python would die for lack of air and he would be responsible for its death without being guilty of killing it, which seemed to him a very happy compromise". (AOG,50). In effect, Oduche wishes to eat his cake and have it and we might add, like father, like son!.

The deeper symbolism of this character trait is that in the same way as Ezeulu sends his son to the Christian congregation (a religion which seeks to annihilate his people's traditional faith system), he also sits contentedly as the chief priest of Ulu, the guardian deity of his people, a position which requires him to protect the clan from the onslaught of any invading powers. In legal parlance, we may state that Ezeulu seeks to approbate and reprobate by posturing as the superintendent and protector of his people's way of life while working actively as an ally and collaborator of a foreign power bent on decimating the socio-cultural and religious ethos of his people. This speaks volumes about his janus-like disposition and ambivalence as a leader.

Furthermore, Ezeulu gives expression to his character of self-service and inconsistency in his encounter with captain Winterbottom's messenger at his Obi. To the summons Okperi by Winterbottom, Ezeulu directs the messenger to go back and inform his master that the Chief Priest does not leave his house. Stunned by the messenger's refusal to relay such message, he quips: "I have never heard of a messenger choosing the message he will carry. Go and tell the white man what Ezeulu says. Or are you the white man yourself?" (AOG,140).

It is remarkable that when it suits him, Ezeulu could easily make a distinction between the message and the messenger but when his interests are at stake, he attempts to assume the omnibus status of both message and messenger.

For instance, he ascribes his personal grievances against his people as a vicarious insult on the deity to the effect that if Ezeulu is displeased then Ulu is correspondingly affronted. He tends to forget that as the message is distinct from the messenger, the bow different from the arrow, therefore, the Chief Priest of Ulu is distinct from the deity. Ezeulu, therefore, seeks to be both the message and the messenger thus seeking to be both the bow and the arrow of god simultaneously. This is the self-serving and ambitious mindset which leads Ezeulu to become despotic and anti-people in the misguided belief that Ulu would regard any challenge to Ezeulu's power as an affront on the deity. He is soon proved wrong.

Additionally, Ezeulu as Chief Priest who ascribes omniscient knowledge to himself feels righteously indignant in relation to his people's anxieties because he believes that their increasing dissatisfaction with his authoritarian leadership is not founded on good reason. He does not see the rationale why the people should be aggrieved by his testimony in favour of Okperi people for which Captain Winterbottom, "... sat in judgment over Umuaro and Okperi and gave the disputed land to Okperi" (AOG, 29).

Ethical Quandary

In spite of Ezeulu's righteous indignation arising from his posturing as a principled truth-bearer and man of integrity, his action raises a number of ethical and political questions. For instance, the issue arises whether a "truth" which injures the economic, political and existential interest of an entire people should be seen as transcendental. Related to this is the issue as to whether it is right for a political leader such as Ezeulu to go against his people, and to do so publicly, in matters of foreign relations in which victory by the enemy is injurious to his own people's survival and internal cohesion. This goes to the root of the eternal debate as to the chemistry of truth. In his work "On the Nature of Truth", Bertrand Russel (1906) notes that there are two broad perspectives on the subject matter namely: whether there is only one truth (otherwise known as monism) or whether there are many truths. Put differently, whether truth is integral and transcendental regardless of the circumstances or whether truth is existential and utilitarian in which case it is conditioned by the circumstances. The depth of these questions should be soberly considered in relation to the unimpeachable fact that the Ulu deity and by extension Ezeulu the Chief Priest of Ulu, are children of circumstances who were instituted by the people to protect them in their numerous wars with their enemies. Ironically and symbolically, Ezeulu, the custodian of this

protective deity, turns round to betray his people in the name of the bogus claim of telling the truth.

It would appear that Captain Winterbottom is equally surprised by Ezeulu's misguided betrayal of his people even if his testimony helps him resolve the contentious land dispute. Of this episode, Winterbottom says, "only one man – a kind of priest king in Umuaro – witnessed against his own people. I have not found out what it was, but I think he must have some pretty fierce tabu working on him..." (AOG,39). It seems clear that captain Winterbottom is both disappointed and shocked by Ezeulu's act of betrayal against a people he is sworn to protect. No wonder Winterbottom believes that Ezeulu must have been possessed by a powerful malevolent external force as the only explanation for his untoward action.

In effect, therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, to substantiate Ezeulu's claim to integrity merely because he told an unethical and self destructive truth. This is more so because we are aware of his antecedents, and we are siesed of occasions wherein he was confronted with critical matters which required him to tell the truth but rather than doing so, he vacillated and took the convenient route of ambivalence and double speak. Examples include Obike's humiliating treatment of his in-laws and Oduche's desecration of the land at which instances, he failed to stay on the path of truth and propriety by his refusal to condemn his own sons for their bad behaviours. It would, therefore, seem that Ezeulu's action against his people is not actually motivated by his moral stature as a truth – bearer but rather, as a subtle attempt to impress the white man whose power he has long recognized and coveted, which recognition makes him send his son, Oduche, to learn the ways of the white man. His testimony against his people may, therefore, represent an extension of his recurrent anti-people, and undemocratic tendencies motivated by a personal ambition to align with a superior political force.

Furthermore, notice should be taken of the fact that in spite of his office as Chief Priest, Ezeulu goes ahead to send his son to the adversarial white man's religion, which is manifestly subversive of his public office as the custodian of his people's religion and their protector against external attacks. It is significant and remarkable to note that at Oduche's baptism, Mr. Goodcountry- the agent of the white man and the new religion- tellingly declares that Oduche "will be called Peter; on this rock will I build my church" (AOG,49). We instantly recall the biblical reference to Peter, which indicates that Oduche will be the cornerstone for the destruction of the traditional

religion and way of life of Umuaro and the foundation for the propagation of the new religion in the area. This statement embodies the allusion, and foreshadows the fact, that Ezeulu will directly and indirectly be the symbol for the vanquishing of his people and the enthronement of the new, alien religion. Ezeulu is simply and squarely an ally of the white man and a saboteur against his own people.

Again, it is important to note that although the white man is responsible for Ezeulu's suffering at Okperi, all his mental energy while in prison is deployed, ironically, towards exacting maximum punishment from his own people rather than his actual traducers because in spite of his travails in the hands of the white man, Ezeulu's "real struggle was with his own people and the white man was, without knowing it, his ally" (AOG,176). It would seem that the cat is finally out of the bag that Ezeulu is a collaborator of the white man in the mission to destroy his community. Thus, Ezeulu is merely using his imprisonment as a smokescreen to punish his people and serve the ends of the white man.

In effect, although Ezeulu publicly rejects the offer to be appointed a warrant chief, we can hazard the educated guess that he secretly craves for the office and may have accepted the appointment were it better packaged! It is probably an early lobby for that appointment that informed his unethical and self-destructive testimony against his people to impress the white man as a reliable truth bearer. This conjecture appears plausible because Ezeulu, whose mother is from Okperi, is well aware of the enormous powers of the warrant chief of Okperi and would have cherished such powers to effectively silence his opponents such as Nwaka and tyrannize his people whose republican attitude often challenge his overbearing authority. Perhaps, the major reason why Ezeulu turned down the appointment is because of the undignifying manner in which the offer is made arising from the administrative bungling of Winterbottom's subordinates. In relation to his imprisonment and the offer of appointment, we learn that Ezeulu almost persuaded himself that "the white man 'wintabota' had meant well but that his good intentions had been frustrated in action by all the intermediaries like the Head messenger and his ill-mannered, young white pup" (AOG,175). In effect, it seems safe to assert that Ezeulu may have accepted the offer were the circumstances auspicious. He simply does not want to appear power-hungry in accepting the offer after sounding so principled to the head messenger in the presence of other people, and after Ogbuefi Nwaka had recurrently accused him of vaulting ambition and inordinate quest for power

(AOG, 27). These circumstances appear to be the underlying deterrents to his acceptance of the offer to become a warrant chief.

As tension mounts in Umuaro over his refusal to eat the yams, Ezeulu remains obstinate. His explanation for acting against the public interest is that while he was imprisoned at Okperi, “two new moons came and went and there was no one to break kolanut to him (Ulu) and Umuaro kept silent” (Achebe, 208). By his pedantic insistence on rigidly complying with the lunar calendar for eating of the old yams, Ezeulu not only betrays a tragic insensitivity and lack of dynamism but also demonstrates poor leadership which disables him from appreciating the import of the saying that a strange illness does not bear the application of everyday herbs. This in itself is the root of the doctrine of necessity.

Even the desperate proposal of the ten highest titled men in Umuaro to bear whatever punishments that Ulu may decree should he be offended that the yams are eaten out of turn equally failed to move Ezeulu who fails to appreciate that Umuaro people are not responsible for his incarceration at Okperi. Indeed, while he was there, they paid him endless solidarity visits and on his return, they keep streaming into his compound to pledge their goodwill and loyalty. We learn that “in the course of the second day (after his return), he (Ezeulu) counted fifty-seven visitors excluding women. Six of them had brought palm wine...” (AOG, 187). In spite of the people's innocence as to his travails, their goodwill and solidarity to their leader, Ezeulu is bent on implementing his self-serving, anti-people project. In a fit of frustration, one of the people's representatives-Ogbuefi Ofoka- is forced to explode Ezeulu's secret motive:

Do not say that I am fond of questions; said Ofoka, 'But I should like to know on whose side you are Ezeulu, I think you have just said that you have become the whip with which Ulu flogs Umuaro'. (AOG, 209) (emphasis added).

Consequent upon his tyrannical disposition, “almost overnight Ezeulu had become something of a public enemy in the eyes of all and, as was to be expected, his entire family shared in his guilt” (AOG, 211).

Upon seeing the new moon and subsequently eating the twelfth yam, he sets the date of the New Yam Feast for a whopping 28 days' time! Following

a fearful dream in which “mourners seemed to be passing behind his compound...” (AOG, 221), Ezeulu is alarmed and resolves to challenge the trespassers. He “raised his voice to summon his family to join him in challenging the trespassers but his compound was deserted...” (AOG, 221). This foreshadows the bitter loneliness and impending disaster which is to overcome Ezeulu as he refuses to step back from the precipice as it becomes increasingly clear that Ulu, the protective deity of the people does not sanction Ezeulu's vengeful actions (AOG, 15). The implication is that as the created cannot be greater than the creator, the deity cannot really become more powerful than those who collectively instituted him for their own protection. As Ezeulu rejects all entreaties to rescue his people, his best friend, Akuebue reminds him that no matter how powerful or knowledgeable he thinks he may be, “no man, however great can win judgment against a clan” (AOG,131). This represents a lofty testament to democracy and popular power as well as a potent reminder of the supremacy of the people's will in that any single individual who stands against the popular will only seeks to be crushed.

The Subversion of Tyranny

Left with no option to their suffering because of Ezeulu's tyrannical and anti-people obstinacy, the people of Umuaro revolves to initiate an impeachment motion, so to speak, against Ezeulu, and if need be, to destroy the Ulu deity himself just like the people of Aninta, their neighbours did, when they “drove out and burnt Ogba (their deity) when he left what he was called to do and did other things, when he turned round to kill the people of Aninta instead of their enemies” (AOG,159). This passage graphically and powerfully mirrors the practice in most democratic societies in which the people not only have the power to impeach a non-performing leader but also to recall their instituted representatives even before another electoral cycle. And here lies Achebe's democratic paradigm to the effect that power lies with the people and the people have the right and responsibility to dismiss or subvert any dictator who works hardship against their extant interests.

It would appear that the new awareness of the people of Umuaro about the evil nature of their Chief Priest, is almost belated because Nwaka, his antagonist, had all along, been harping on the evil nature, power-hunger and vengefulness of Ezeulu as shown in the episode of the attempted suffocation of the python wherein Ezeulu reveals his true nature. Perceiving the stream of sympathizers into his compound to be hypocritical, Ezeulu loses his temper and in that unguarded moment reveals whom he really is. Ordering a

group of women commiserators out of his compound, he threatens that, “if I see any one of you still here when I go and come back she will know that I am an evil man” (AOG,52). This represents a definite, perhaps unconscious, confession of his evil constitution which arises from his own introspective analysis of his personality. Whether we like it or not, we must accept that Ezeulu is certainly an authority on himself! Thus, we must take him by his own words namely: that he is an evil man.

It is important to note that Oduche’s imprisonment of the python in the box correlates with Ezeulu's later imprisonment at Okperi which makes it impossible for kolanut to be broken to Ulu in the course of two months thereby offending the deity. It would appear that the imprisonment of the python, a deity, by the new Christian convert – Oduche – and the imprisonment of Ezeulu and vicariously, Ulu (another deity) at Okperi by Winterbottom's surrogate represents a parabolic statement that the assault on the traditional institution of Umuaro arises from a collaborative effort of both the European missionaries and their local agents with Ezeulu at the heart of both. With the emergence of a confluence of awareness as to the despotic nature of the Chief Priest by both Ezeulu himself and the people of Umuaro, the people are left with no choice than to abandon him and seek his destruction. The eventual death of Obika after performing the funeral rite for the second burial of Amalu and the subsequent madness of Ezeulu show that the cries of the people have eventually reached Ulu who has now avenged them. In the face of the tragedy that has overtaken Ezeulu, the people see it as a vindication by their god, Ulu:

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 one ever won judgment against his clan (AOG,230).

Like all tyrants who execute their selfish agenda hiding under the pretext of public interest, Ezeulu discovers, too late, that his diverse ambitions and his personal grievances are not necessarily conterminous with those of the deity – Ulu.

While we must appreciate, as the people of Umuaro have done, the destruction of Ezeulu as the victory of the people over the despotic tyranny

of their leader, we must further come to terms with the fact that Ezeulu is a quintessential dictator while his tragedy represents the tragedy of all tyrants whether at Umuaro or elsewhere. Viewed from this perspective, Achebe's *Arrow of God* transcends cultural and interpersonal conflicts and emerges as a timeless paradigm of democracy and a humanistic blueprint for the subversion of tyranny. In subordinating the dictatorial antics of the spiritopolitical leader symbolized by Ezeulu to the overriding will of the people, Achebe at once satisfies his pragmatic prescription for commitment in literature and also validates E.M. Forster's eternal apology for democracy when, in his essay, "What I Believe", he notes that the appeal of democracy is based on the fact that it recognizes the place of the individual in the scheme of things as well as the fact that it is tolerant of criticisms. According to Forster (1939), humankind is obliged to accord "Two cheers for democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism".

Furthermore, as Greenberg et al (1993) have pointed out in their book, *Constitutionalism and Democracy: Transition in the Contemporary World*, "the chief check democratic theorists posit against tyranny is that the people will not tyrannize themselves. They will try to choose officials who will not enact oppressive laws, and will vote out of office, those who do" (p.4). This is exactly what the people of Umuro have done in *Arrow of God* as they come to the crying realization that their official, their leader, their chief priest, is an alchemy of tyranny who must be dethroned and abandoned.

Conclusion/Observation

For Chinua Achebe, a self-confessed exemplar of the pragmatic orientation, *Arrow of God* stands tall as a timeless banner and an evergreen testament to the ideals of democracy and people-centred government. Achebe's personal comment on his artistic vision as embodied in *Arrow of God* is both enlightening and revealing. In his essay, "the Writer and His Community", he responds to the touching letter of John Updike who wrote to commend him on the excellent execution of the tragic vision in *Arrow of God*. On the portraiture of Ezeulu, Achebe underscores the primacy of the people's will regardless of the towering stature of their leader. Of such leaders, Achebe says, "even when, like Ezeulu, he is a leader and priest, he is still in a very real sense subordinate to his community" (1988:38-39).

To lend credence to the democratic impulse evident in *Arrow of God*, Achebe insists that, in spite of their republican and individualistic tendencies, the

people, say Igbos in whose area the action of the novel is set, are not normally prepared to give up their group identity. To achieve a profitable middle-ground between individualism and group survival, he says that Igbos:

...set about balancing this extraordinary specialness, this unsurpassed individuality, by setting limits to its expression. The first limit is the democratic one which subordinates the person to the group in practical social matters (1988:39).

It seems certain that in *Arrow of God*, in keeping with his self-assigned role as a teacher, Achebe set out to foreground the imperatives of democracy. He does this by skillfully promoting individual rights, tendencies and idiosyncrasies in a manner that does not threaten the foundation of group survival.

However, in spite of Achebe's obvious concern for the promotion of individual rights without compromising group survival and democracy, it is noteworthy that his portraiture of women in the novel is less than salutary. Notwithstanding their numerical strength which, we are told, runs into, "thousands and thousands" (*AOG*, 72), Achebe neither assigns the women any meaningful role nor gives them any authentic voice. Their roles in the novel are rather stereotypical as they appear as appendages whose chief functions revolve around pandering to the wishes of their husbands and children or simply acting as ceremonial acolytes. A telling instance which is representative of the dismissive treatment of women in the novel is borne out by the "dialogue" between Ezeulu and one of his wives (Ugoye) on the issue of sending Oduche for Western education. Ezeulu snidely asks: "How does it concern you what I do with my sons?. (*AOG*,46). This smacks of gross insensitivity to Ugoye's humanity and motherly feeling. Throughout the novel, the women are either treated as second class appendages or they are roundly objectified. This is not unlike what obtains in Nigeria's contemporary political scene wherein women are majorly used as dancers and entertainers in political rallies and meetings.

Another touching example which is sadly epigraphic of the lowly status of women of *Arrow of God* is seen in the episode of the stream of sympathizers who visit Ezeulu on his return from Okperi for which, in the course of the second day, "he counted fifty-seven visitors excluding the women" (emphasis mine) (*AOG*,187). The implication is unmistakable. The women are not only

objectified but also they are made invisible and voiceless and so cannot be counted in the roll call of visitors. This constitutes a deliberate thingification of women, which finds expression in much of the novel.

In the final analysis, it bears pointing out that Achebe acquits himself creditably through the creative manipulation of language by interspersing the presentation with proverbs, idioms and occasional transliteration of his native Igbo language. Through strategic authorial interpolations, Achebe enables the reader to grasp the full depth of the prevailing tensions and conflicts. Through the recurrent emphasis on the saying that “no man, however great, can win judgment against his clan”, the reader achieves a full appreciation of the people-centred emphasis of the novel.

What he does with language, he also does with characterization as each persona fits his or her role in the high drama of community concourse. We note, for instance, the aloofness of the white man, the aristocratic and imperial bearing of Ezeulu in action and speech, the oratory and eminence of Nwaka, the self-effacing bearing of the women folk, and the merry-go-round nature of the children. In the end, Achebe builds up a tragedy of epic proportions which not only conveys a powerful message but also fits into the Aristotelian model of tragedy in which the protagonist is destroyed by his peculiar hubris and yet he evokes fear and pity within us exactly as does Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*.

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