

Contests of Text and Context in Chinua Achebe's "Arrow of God"

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If there is a common resistance to reading, this is not a realistic fear. It confuses contests for meaning with disorder. And often it reflects a wish to present an "objective" rhetoric, refusing to locate its own modes of production within inventive culture and historical change.

JAMES CLIFFORD, *Writing Culture*

PROVERBS ARE SO CONSPICUOUS in Chinua Achebe's novels that they constitute the most studied singular feature of his art. As it were, Achebe's use of proverbs is in itself proverbial. One can speak of two tendencies in this well-traversed area. Bold critics often tend to generate ethnic theories of cognition from the structure and nature of the proverbs, and much of the highly perceptive ones concentrate on the significance of the sayings in Achebe's creative construction of "vernacular" conversation. For the reason that proverbs usually employ concrete images, Cairns suggests, for instance, that the sayings reflect the African predilection for non-abstract thought (16). However, more perceptive Achebe scholars have revealed that he uses proverbs to add distinctively local shade to his settings, depict the speech patterns and conventions of Igbo characters who would not ordinarily speak English, define these characters by particular types of proverbs, and also exercise narrative control by changing "thematic" statements as his plots develop. In addition, such studies reveal that women and children do not cite proverbs in Achebe's *Igboland* and that "educated" people (ironically, like Achebe himself), more often than not, forget or misuse

proverbs.¹ In spite of the large attention paid to his inventiveness in proverb usage, a lack still exists of a "rhetorical" analysis of this all-important aspect of Achebe's work.² Two factors could have, in the main, contributed to this neglect. First, paremiology used to be almost exclusively an anthropologist's forte wherein proverbs were defined in terms of the mores of the people that use them. Second, many critics believe that Achebe chooses the proverb as his signature idiom because he is a teacher, his novels are his lesson plans, and no other figure known to literary anthropology helps the teacher better than the proverb (Achebe, "The Novelist" 162).³ Why is the proverb such a good friend of the teacher-novelist? It is an oral and rural manner of speaking, it is highly pragmatic, and it is unavoidably didactic. According to Patnaik,

[c]ultures that employ the oral mode of communication are more likely to value compressed succinct expression. What better vehicle of communication than the proverb, which by its very nature penetrates to the heart of the situation and character, lending at the same time, to succinct thought a freshness of expression and ingeniousness of idea. (68)

While not disregarding the basic assumption of anthropological interpretation, I suggest in this paper that proverbs are not mere vehicles of thought. I equate them with structures that render thinking perceptible. I assume that proverbs are rhetorical not because they are simply figures of speech but because they thematize the possibility of representing speech. Much as they are about political control, the tragic conflicts in *Arrow of God* result from what I perceive to be an almost endless jostling for superiority between the authorities of message, meaning, and context. The colonial milieu provides the concrete historical and political boundaries within which these "proverbial" contests play themselves out.⁴ In the ensuing "literary" reading of one thematic proverb—"a messenger does not choose its message" (158)—in *Arrow of God*, I argue that the novel dramatizes not just the well-documented monumental disaster that accompanies the colonial incursion into Umuaro but also the role that disagreements over reading (in this so-called "oral" culture) play in the development of the novel's tragedy.

A messenger's loyalty to its charge first becomes the main focus of a conversation when Ezeulu rejects Tony Clarke's orders to report to the District Headquarters for instruction on becoming a Warrant Chief.

"Do you know what you are saying, my friend?" asked the messenger in utter unbelief.

"Are you a messenger or not?" asked Ezeulu. "Go home and give my message to your master." (157)

To avert a major confrontation between the cocky imperial messenger and the tradition conscious audience, Akuebue quickly intervenes with a tacit citation of tradition on the appropriate comportment of messengers:

In Umuaro it is not our custom to refuse a call, although we may refuse to do what the caller asks. Ezeulu does not want to refuse the white man's call and so he is sending his son. (157)

When the messenger declines this reminder of tradition, Akuebue expresses his surprise with the proverb "I have never heard of a messenger choosing the message he will carry" (158).

The messenger "chooses" his message, as Akuebue implies, not because there is no proverb prohibiting such behaviour where he comes from, but because the messenger believes he speaks for a sovereign Crown that is not subject to "local" laws. He deems it untenable that a local potentate could cite tradition to so dismiss the white master's subpoena. This little skirmish over the importance of a message as determined by the social position of its originator and courier is going to lead to unimaginable implications for Ezeulu and his community as the story unfolds.

In tracing the itinerary of the sad events that ensue, I find that most other key conflicts in the novel—even before this encounter—involve the cultural control of either messages or messengers. At several crucial moments, the plot relies on the outcome of struggles for command between the messages and messengers, and on all such occasions, the messengers succeed regardless of what the contestants think. The messengers at each of these turns demonstrates that they have minds of their own independent of the fates of their messages, their senders, and their intended receivers. In almost every instance, the messen-

gers accepts all messages dumped on them, but deliver only those that suit them. In the wake of what we may call this apparent "betrayal," tragic scenarios often result. On most occasions, the messengers appear indifferent to the incessant struggles on how to articulate the dispatchers' intentions with the receivers' wives.

The first consequential conflict in the novel arises when a delegation, charged with negotiating a choice of settlement of a land dispute with Okperi, unwittingly botches its mission. One of the elders at the meeting specifically tells Akukalia that "we do not want Okperi to choose war; nobody eats war. If they choose peace we shall rejoice. *But whatever they say you are not to dispute with them.* Your duty is to bring word back to us" (19). As Ogbuefi Egonwanne bids here, the emissaries are to be true messengers, though, as Ezeulu argues later, not necessarily messengers of truth. The clan expects Akukalia to be a transparent messenger in whom its message could be easily read, for according to proverbial injunction, he cannot choose his message.

The message, partly because of the messenger's meddling with his commission, actually miscarries when Akukalia reaches Okperi. First, it is the market day in Okperi, and there are not too many qualified people around to receive the message. Second, Akukalia is impatient and refuses to return at a more convenient time because, according to him, his "mission could not wait" (25). The urgency, I must say, is not part of the message, and there is therefore little surprise, except for the messenger who has added the urgency, when Ebo, his Okperi host, quotes the traditional saying, "I have not yet heard of a message that could not wait" (25). A heated argument ensues, and at one point Ebo, presumably innocently, censures Akukalia: "if you want to shout like a castrated bull you must wait until you return to Umuaro" (26). Incidentally, Akukalia is an impotent man, "whose two wives were secretly given to other men to bear his children" (26). At this point, the hitherto wayward message totally falls through. Akukalia runs into Ebo's family shrine and breaks his *ikenga*, "the strength of his right arm" (27). By so doing, Akukalia severs Ebo's communication channel with his ancestors. To convince his primogenitors that he is still alive, Ebo

murders his assailant. By virtue of this incident, the Okperi people unwittingly choose war because customarily Umuaro must draw equal compensation for Akukalia's death. Akukalia does not live long enough to pass on the options in his charge, but the message got delivered. The messenger's body, even in death, anchors the mission.

Before discussing the major singular conflict in the story, I want quickly to examine another important episode involving an argument over the supremacy of either the message or the messenger. The colonial administration wants to make Ezeulu its messenger by offering him a warrant chieftaincy. Already, Ezeulu is a messenger of Ulu and the Umuaro community, but Tony Clarke and his superiors in the colonial hierarchy do not perceive him as one. So, after making his offer through an interpreter, Clarke asks, "Well, are you accepting the offer or not?" (196). Ezeulu replies:

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

"What!" shouted Tony 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! (196)

Clarke's detention order spells doom for the community, and greater conflicts over the role of the messenger develop.

Ezeulu already sees himself as a messenger of his god, whose command he does not dispute, but Clarke and Winterbottom read him incorrectly by assuming that he is a transparently honest messenger on whom they could load their own message. They develop the wrong prompt after listening to the chief's testimony against his own clan during the Okperi-Umuaro boundary adjustment inquiries. Somehow, the colonial operatives believe that Ezeulu's deposition, which contradicted his clan's claims, marks him out as an unusually honest African who can be trusted with the Crown's directives to Umuaro citizens. The colonial administrators do not know that Ezeulu is not a dispassionate messenger on whose face they can wilfully inscribe their own messages. This singular misreading engenders the

tragic conflict that occurs over the eating of two calendrical yams. Ezeulu's detention for refusing the chieftaincy prevents him from re-marking the communal schedule for two months. As the drama of how to prevent an imminent collapse of the Umuaro economy unfolds, it appears clearly that different sectors of the federation are motivated by vested methods of textual interpretation, negotiations on deciphering the will of the messenger and of the sender *vis-à-vis* the truthfulness of the message. It is also a battle over the "nature" of nature.

First, Ezeulu's assistants, who also "reckon" the number of months, approached the chief priest after the "twelfth moon" to make arrangements for the next New Yam Feast. One of them says:

It is now four days since the new moon appeared in the sky; it is already grown big. And yet you have not called us together to tell us the day of the New Yam Feast— (232)

And Ezeulu responds, "I see. I thought perhaps I did not hear you well. Since when did you begin to reckon the year for Umuaro?" (233). One of the assistants, Chukwulobe, who thinks Obiesili is tactless, recasts the request: "We do not reckon the year for Umuaro; we are not Chief Priest. But we thought that perhaps you have lost count because of your recent absence—" (233). Ezeulu completely loses his temper:

Lost count! Did your father tell you that the Chief Priest of Ulu can lose count of the moons? No, my son . . . no Ezeulu can lose count. Rather it is you who count with your fingers who are likely to make a mistake, to forget which finger you counted at the last moon. (233)

There is no doubt that Ezeulu's incarceration in Okperi could not but result in loss in counting; in fact, that is partly the reason why tradition does not allow the chief priest to stay away from Umuaro for an extended period of time. But if counting the yams is all there is, then he has not lost count, for he has the yams to refer to, and there can be no arguments over that. But one more visit two days later by the titled elders further shows that there is more to this conversation than mere yams. The elders call on Ezeulu to urge him to amend the calendar so as not to change things as they know them to be. But to their gracious entreaties Ezeulu replies, "I need not speak in riddles. You all

know what our custom is. I only call a new festival when there is only one yam left' " (236). When the elders insist that Ezeulu should seek a way out, with one of them even suggesting that he eat up the yams, the Priest restates his position saying, "you have spoken well. But what you ask me to do is not done. Those yams are not food and a man does not eat them because he is hungry. You are asking me to eat death" (237).

Again, Ezeulu is both right and wrong, and the ambiguity is not totally of his own making. The yams are food and, of course, not food. They are food because he eats them; they are not food because these particular yams satisfy more than nutritional needs, and someone will have to eat them if the entire community is not to starve. In other words, the yams are yams and not yams at the same time. They are markers (or messengers or signifiers) of the communal calendar, and Ezeulu (another marker or signifier) is the designated reader and, arguably, the writer.

Surprisingly, Ezeulu the designated reader now takes an unprecedented stand by refusing to read according to the senders' (the community's) will. He hedges the elders and his assistants because the yams (messengers) have a will of their own (their materiality) that he exploits, knowingly or unknowingly. He denies the elders their wishes by telling them that, although they are the initial creators of the calendar, the yams and whatever they now signify are beyond their direct control. The elders, on the other hand, also recognize the yams' will, and they too seek to bend it to serve the purpose imperilled by current circumstances but for which the yams were originally invented. Ezeulu hides behind the invincibility of the messenger (signifier), and the elders wave the banner of the infallibility of the social will. The elders face a greater difficulty than Ezeulu because they have to contend with two messengers: the yams (the text) and their eater (the reader). The resultant confusion is more disconcerting because ordinary reasoning suggests that this is an open text whose letters everybody can decipher but which no one can now read.⁵

The community expects Ezeulu to count the moons with the aid of the yams and *not* the yams with the moons. Chukwulobe

therefore suggests he has lost count, but Ezeulu rejects such counsel because the yams (the messenger, the signifier) say he has not. In a way, the yams carry transparent messages that neither the yams, nor Ezeulu, nor the aides and the elders can choose for them. Ezeulu accordingly rejects the pleas of his aides and the community that he should count moons and not yams. He maintains that it is impossible for him and anybody else to do so, and anyone who has a contrary opinion must actually be miscounting. The yam counter, he insists, is forever right, and the finger counter incessantly susceptible to miscounting.

The yams are relatively permanent and differentiable, and once eaten they are no more countable. Every yam eaten (thus counted) disappears, and its absence announces its conspicuousness and thereby determines the value of the remainder. On the other hand, the fingers are not removed, they are always present and so could be recounted. These facts notwithstanding, the community believes that Ezeulu is wrong in the values he assigns to the remaining yams. The citizens do not share Ezeulu's calculations that the yams represent an unalterable ("natural") number of moons.⁶ Ezeulu holds everybody to ransom because the yams, like him, though messengers, and contrary to proverbial injunctions, have their own designs that are indifferent to whatever purpose for which the users (the senders and the receivers) might wish to make of them. Ironically, it is also this independence that tethers them to the schemes of whoever deems them useful.

It is also possible for us to see the Ezeulu-Umuaro fiasco as the product of a quarrel over the cultural control of nature and its signs. In Ezeulu's logic (also available to his opponents), there can be no culture (the year, the calendar) beyond the significance of the yams. The year ends only at the mercy of the calendar and not because it has a natural end. That is why, after consulting the deity over whether or not he should announce the New Yam Feast as the elders demand, he comes out with a negative result (240). But the arbitrariness of the whole marking system, the lack of organic connection between the yam (the signifier) and the New Yam Feast (the signified, the planting season and, by implication, the fiscal year) is highlighted by the elders' insistence

that Ezeulu either eat the yams or substitute a sacrifice. The elders believe they made Ulu, not because Ulu "gave birth" to the yams or the harvest, but because they made it so. Anichebe Udeozo speaks to this effect when he says to Ezeulu: "I want you to look around this room and tell me what you see. Do you think there is another Umuaro outside this hut now?" (237). Ezeulu agrees with him that the elders are the creators of the Federation and the tradition. Udeozo then tells him:

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 next harvest . . . and if Ulu says we have committed an abomination let it be on the heads of the ten of us here. (237-38)

Udeozo's plea falls on deaf ears, and Ezeulu's wish partially prevails because the same arbitrariness that the elders' entreaties hang on also permits the chief priest to read the yams his own way.

Were Udeozo talking to a messenger that had no interest in his message, his invocation of public interest might have swayed Ezeulu. But the chief priest is prosecuting a personal agenda while furthering Ulu's course. He pursues his grievance under the pretext that he is a mere messenger who does not select his messages, whereas in fact he chooses them at every turn. He could not be proved false because, "cultural" (proverbial) prohibition notwithstanding, it appears that all messengers possess the ability to bear their own messages in addition to others latched onto them.

What are the specifics of Ezeulu's grudge? Prior to his detention, Ezeulu has had a long-running disagreement with some sections of his community in the persons of the rival priest of Idemili and his active supporter, the wealthy Nwaka. The high point of this conflict occurs during the land dispute inquiry I mentioned above. Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Umuaro's "highest" deity, almost singlehandedly gives the parcel of land in question to the foreigners, who, by the way, are his mother's people. In this society, historical recollection is a reconstitution, subject to conjecture and personal interests. Ezeulu, even with his high office, does not possess the right to a *correct* historical

reconstruction and as such has no right to speak *for* the community. But, acting on the belief that his is the voice of a messenger speaking only for the deity he serves, he testifies against his people. He thereby chooses his message, which he believes belongs to his deity.

Ezeulu also uses the same rationale at the acrimonious pre-war deliberations when he appeals to the people to listen to him because he speaks on behalf of a deity that never endorses unjust courses. "Ulu would not fight an unjust war," he says. To buttress this point, he informs the assembly: "My father said this to me that when our village first came here to live the land belonged to Okperi. . . . This is the story as I heard it from my father" (17).⁷ At this meeting, Ezeulu maintains he does not speak for himself but as a simple messenger of truth, and Nwaka, his most notorious opponent, replies that that does not make him a *truthful* messenger.

Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own. Knowledge of the land is also like that. Ezeulu has told us what his father told him about the olden days. We know that a father does not speak falsely to his son. But we also know that the lore of the land is beyond the knowledge of many fathers. . . . My father told me a different story. (17-18)

Nwaka may be right in several other unstated respects. At the least, Ezeulu's mother, of whom he has fond memories, comes from Okperi. In addition, the priest is also involved in a theological rivalry with Ezidemili. He cannot for these reasons be a messenger of unimpeachable truth."

While taking refuge in the proverb of a messenger not choosing its message, Ezeulu testifies against his people and conveniently forgets another proverb: "no man, however great, can win a judgment against his clan" (148). Henceforth, the community regards itself as set against Ezeulu and so sees nothing heroic in his refusal to be the white man's chief. As fate would have it, it is this very lack of enthusiasm that Ezeulu, still using the old alibi that he is a mere messenger, now avenges on his people by refusing to bend the message of the yams. At any rate, only in Ezeulu's mind does such a notion exist, because evidence abounds that there is nothing like a mere messenger and that

every messenger bears its own message, if only that of a *message bearer*.

The novel's tragedy further takes shape partly because Ezeulu does not understand that even the messenger cannot totally control the messages in its care, its own messages included. This is so because, like their carriers, messages have their own wills, and these wills are messengers in another sense. As dramatized in the pre-war meeting, Ezeulu's anti-war message, for which he claims divine guidance, can easily be interpreted against him, as Nwaka does, as "I am the voice of Okperi that also happens to be the land of your chief priest's mother" (17). In other words, Ezeulu is *not* a mere messenger although he shelters himself behind the proverbial "injunction" that says he is."

To conclude this section on the apparent discrepancy between historical experience as narrated here and cultural "injunction" as "encoded" in the proverb, I want to cite one incident between Ezeulu and his son, Oduche, whom he has sent to join the local Anglican Church so as, in Ezeulu's words, "to be his eyes" among the people of the new religion. While packaging the boy, as it were, Ezeulu does not think that Oduche may like the new faith and all the benefits and prestige that come with it. Ezeulu, thoughtful as he is, never imagined that the new faith will make his son an inheritor of a legacy that empowers the boy to kill the sacred snake of Idemili (another Umuaro deity and Ulu's arch-rival), which the local teacher interprets to be a species of the serpent that deceived Adam and Eve. None of Oduche's independent but prohibited actions as a Christian surpasses his not telling his father that Umuaro citizens, in a desperate attempt to escape hunger and poverty, are sending the sacrificial yams that they normally give to Ulu on the day of the New Yam Feast to Jesus, the Christ. When Ezeulu learns about this development from his friend, he is surprised that his son (his eyes, his messenger) did not alert him earlier. He rebukes the boy:

Do you remember what I told you when I sent you among those people? . . . I called you as a father calls his son and told you to go and be my eye and ear among those people. I did not send Obika or Edogo; I did not send Nwafo, your mother's son. I called you by name and you came here—in this *obi*—and I sent you to *see and hear for me*. I did not know at that time that I was sending a goat's skull. (251)

Again, the messenger derails the message. The messenger chooses, because of the comforts of the destination, not to fulfill his commission. He returns no answer to the sender.

One other image that aptly illustrates the itinerary I am drawing appears in the narration of Ezeulu's first night in detention at Okperi. Ezeulu has vowed not to watch for the moon while he is in detention, "but," the narrator tells us, "the eye is very greedy and will steal a look at something its owner has no wish to see" (179). Ezeulu watches for the moon that night although he did not see anything. The visual imagery, again, demonstrates the inevitable errancy of the messenger. In other words, the messenger has its own business to attend to that often might not coincide with the dispatcher's.¹⁰

I find the greatest support for the disparity between the proverb and the narration at the point at which Ezeulu's mind snaps. He seeks explanations for the unfortunate turns of events in proverbs that focus on the non-culpability of the messenger in the effect of its message.

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

Perhaps it was the constant, futile throbbing of these thoughts that finally left a crack in Ezeulu's mind. Or perhaps his implacable assailant having stood over him for a little while stepped on him as on an insect and crushed him in the dust. But this final act of malevolence proved merciful. It allowed Ezeulu, in his last days, to live in the haughty splendor of a demented high priest and spared him knowledge of the final outcome. (260-61)

One can hastily read these sayings as confirming that Ezeulu is a victim of the social vagaries that invariably determine the fates of messages and messengers. Lindfors, for instance, interprets the sequence of proverbs as Ezeulu's belated regret of not knowing the limits of his powers. He says, "Ezeulu, in trying to adjust to the changing times, takes certain inappropriate actions which

later lead him to neglect his duties and responsibilities. Not knowing his limitations, he goes too far and plunges himself and his people into disaster" (15). Griffiths has said, rightly I think, that this interpretation is inadequate. But Griffiths's replacement is equally short on several marks. Although it might be correct to say that Ezeulu seeks help in "proverbial" knowledge and that "frantically he runs through the proverbial wisdom seeking for a clear sign that the relationship of trust which must exist between high priest and god still endures" (97), it is, however, not true that this so-called proverbial society (as opposed to modern "literate" ones) and its mores succumb to the "irresistible and incomprehensible force of the white man, a force blind to the values and meaning of tribal life" (97). The invading force is not blind to local values. Indeed, it bends over backwards to understand and manipulate them for its own purpose.

The conglomerate of proverbs running around in Ezeulu's head all centre on the unjust culpability of the messenger. Ezeulu, the ordinary messenger (though of a deity), struggles within a web of proverbs about message and messenger, and ponders why he must suffer for carrying out his duties "faithfully." His assailant is certainly not just the white man as Griffiths claims. Ezeulu is crushed by the burden of his office as both a *message* and a *messenger* at the time when a "discursive displacement" (Spivak 197) is taking place in his land. Ezeulu does not violate "tradition" if his actions are interpreted according to the letters of the proverb. But as the narration shows, proverbs do not ossify tradition. When perceived as "readable" codes, we see that proverbs expose tradition as textual constructs that can only be successfully—politically, that is—invoked by those with prevailing reading strategies.

We need to ask whether or not the proverb is wrong about the irremediable servitude and muteness of the messenger. I believe that the proverb is, in spite of itself, correct to a very large extent because all the messengers who choose to appoint their messages, consciously or not, regardless of their purpose, lose out because everything they had hitherto perceived as controllable messages slipped out of their grips and became other messen-

gers. The proverb seems to be wrong because each manipulator enjoys temporary successes that events usually negate later. Ezeulu makes of the yams messages of vengeance, but the yams eventually turn into messengers of change in the hands of the famished citizens, the local mission school teacher, and the Anglican catechist. The teacher, in particular, recognizes the "open" letters of the yam and fully exploits them by urging his church members to convince their fellow citizens to substitute the church harvest for the New Yam Feast. He even tells them that if the "dead" Ulu can eat one fine tuber from each family, the "living" god deserves at least two. Both the Feast and the church ceremony inhabit entirely different worlds, but Mr. Goodcountry tears them from their different universes and yokes them together because both the yam and the harvest are so usable; they are independent messengers that, so to say, conventions and trappings of particular epochs cannot hold from circulating.

It is tempting to say that Ezeulu's foresight prevails because Christianity becomes widespread and the colonial administration fully settles down in Umuaro. Yielding to such temptation will amount to crediting Ezeulu with more than he deserves, for he is certainly not clairvoyant. Events do not happen the way they do simply because Ezeulu wishes them so but in spite of his desires. Events turn around because the traditional calendar markers refuse ironically to obey Ezeulu's wishes, and respond to the mission teacher's. It is true many kids go to the mission school as Ezeulu suspects they would; even Nwaka—Ezeulu's most vociferous critic—sends his laziest son there. I submit that events turn out this way because of the yam text's favorable response to the local teacher's perceptive, though opportunistic, reading. For readers like Ezeulu, the teacher's substituted text is the anti-thesis of all that the yam was created for.

Chinua Achebe's critics often attribute his wide readership to the simplicity and clear-headedness of his language and plots. As I have shown in this essay, a "literary" reading might indicate that such interpretation need not be simplistic. Undoubtedly, Achebe's fiction provides strong tools for unearthing the relationships of language and power in colonial societies and the

sociolinguistics of English language in postcolonial Nigeria. In equally poignant terms, *Arrow of God* dramatizes problems associated with the materiality of the letter even in so-called oral cultures. In all the "contests" for the manipulation of "textual" meanings in this novel, it appears as if the victor is the "openness" of reading.

NOTES

- 1 For an overview of proverb criticism in Achebe's fiction see Azeze, Cairns, Griffiths, and Lindfors.
- 2 I use rhetoric here in the sense that Paul de Man employs it in the first chapter of his *Allegories of Reading*.
- 3 One proverb will summarize the situation thus: when the willing dancer meets a drummer with an itching palm, a dance ensues.
- 4 And according to C. L. Innes, Achebe's reaction to Joyce Cary's colonialist novels is central to the "fiction" of the text. "Insofar as it is the story of the interaction between colonists and colonized, *Arrow of God* can be seen as yet another response by Achebe to *Mister Johnson* and the literary and historical perspective it represents . . ." (64).
- 5 The calendar furor is not simply the dilemma that sometimes arises when a community thrusts and entrusts its fate in the hands of one person but, in addition, it is a dramatization of the problem of fetishization of knowledge. Every one in Umuaro *knows* it is the end of the year, but the fetish guide of knowledge says they *do not know*. The elders could not fault this argument because it is so.
- 6 The aides and the community could have asked, "counting yams and counting fingers, what is the difference?" and Ezeulu would have responded, "that is the only difference!"
- 7 Umuaro is certainly a patriarchal society, but, surprisingly it does not take any individual patriarch's words, no matter how great, as absolute. Every father, the society believes, has his own story to tell, and even the Chief Priest's father's narrative has no superior force.
- 8 To realize that this novel is also about the authenticity and authentication of historical narratives, see Winterbottom's retelling of this and related incidents to his assistant a few years later. "This war between Umuaro and Okperi began in a rather interesting way. I went into it in considerable detail. . . . As I was saying, this war started because a man from Umuaro went to visit a friend in Okperi one fine morning and after he'd had one or two gallons of palm-wine—it's quite incredible how much of that dreadful stuff they can tuck away—anyhow, this man from Umuaro having drunk his friend's palm wine reached for his *ikenga* and split it in two. I may explain that *ikenga* is the most important fetish in the Ibo man's arsenal, so to speak. It represents his ancestors to whom he must make daily sacrifice. When he dies it is split in two; one half is buried with him and the other half is thrown away. So you can see the implication of what our friend from Umuaro did in splitting his host's fetish. This was, of course, the greatest sacrilege. The outraged host reached for his gun and blew the other fellow's head off. And so a regular war developed between the two villages, until I stepped in. I went into the question of the ownership of the piece of land which was the remote cause of all the unrest and found *without any shade of doubt* that it belonged to Okperi. I should mention that every witness who testified before me—from both sides without exception—perjured themselves. One thing you must remember

in dealing with natives is that like children they are great liars. They don't lie simply to get out of trouble. Sometimes they would spoil a good case by a pointless lie. Only one man—a kind of priest-king in Umuro—witnessed against his own people." (41)

- ⁹ For example, he reflects several times on the immensity of his latent powers. In the opening chapter, soon after citing a new moon, Ezeulu, while waiting for the yam to cook, contemplates the extent of his political clout and debates with himself whether "[h]is power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his. As long as the goat was alive it was his; he would find food and take care of it. But the day it was slaughtered he would know who the real owner was. No! the Chief Priest of Ulu was more than that, must be more than that. If he should refuse to name the day [the Feast of Pumpkin Leaves] there would be no festival—no planting and no reaping. But could he refuse? No Chief Priest had ever refused. So it could not be done. He would not dare" (3). Lest it be thought that Ezeulu is a thoroughly evil person, it is very important I remark that he thinks he is obeying social conventions when he acts, but as my discussion should have shown, it is not in the nature of things (that is, it is not conventional) that conventions control all things.
- ¹⁰ In one other incident, Nweke Ukpaka appeals to Moses Unachukwu, the only Umuro citizen who speaks some English, to help his age group inquire from the white road overseer why he is not paying them for the work they do. In his appeal, he says, "a man may refuse to do what is asked of him but may not refuse to be asked . . ." (18) That is to say, a messenger does not choose which message he accepts but exercises a considerable control over that which he delivers. If Ukpaka is right, a messenger cannot just not choose a message, he also cannot not bear a message. However, he cannot choose which ones will reach their destinations.

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