

DISLOCATED LIMINALITIES: ACHEBE'S RABID DOGS, ARROWS AND GODS.

Chike Okoye
Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
okpilimbem@gmail.com

“Oju nkita anya, otaa ma onye nwe ya”
(When a dog gets confounded, it attacks even its master)
-Igbo Proverb

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, published in 1964, is a novel set around the middle of the first half of the last century; a time when the British colonial authorities of Eastern Nigerian were still permeating the hinterlands of the Igbo. These inroads of authority and governance were hinged on the introduction and sustenance of the indirect rule system of native administration. As the colonial administrative conquest machinery rolled on, remaining vestiges of acephalic republics of Igbo communities crumbled, disintegrated and subsequently accepted, albeit grudgingly and ambivalently, the European might of conquest while admitting the potential lucrateness of such action. Umuaro, Achebe's immediate locale and setting for *Arrow of God*, becomes an example and sounding board of sorts of both a community that caved in as a result of a myriad of issues (with the colonial incursion taking precedence), and also a testimony to the deft and classic manner in which Achebe interwove anthropology, history, psychology and art. The novel is primarily about Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, the major deity of Umuaro. It centers on his struggle for authority with a number of varied adversaries such as rivals in his own community of Umuaro, district officers and Christian missionaries. Ezeulu is seen as a sensitive man who gets easily hurt when his advice goes unheeded; especially in his capacity as the chief priest of Ulu. An example in hand is when he warns his people against warring with Okperi; they disregard him and the result becomes catastrophic as Umuaro loses all in the strife. He is also proud and somewhat arrogant man whose high moral and sense of duty is at par with his adamancy with decisions. He rigidly stands by his conviction in sending Oduche his son, to embrace the white man's religion and education. This is coupled with his 'friendship' with Winterbottom in spite of the negative consequences of these stances to both himself and the Umuaro community. Towards the end of the novel, his vengeful nature gradually and catastrophically continues to emerge. It eventually culminates in his decision not to eat the sacred yams and pronounce the New Yam in order to punish Umuaro for failing to rally to his rescue when he was imprisoned for over a month in Okperi. He was locked up for scorning and defying the British administration and Captain Winterbottom. Ezeulu, half-man and half-spirit, is portrayed throughout the story as one who is too proud, headstrong and stubborn and who quite often lords himself above every other person. His disposition is based partly on his assumed liminality of being; because of his half-spirit composition courtesy of his role as chief priest of Ulu deity.

Liminalities and Dislocations

Much of the strands in the plot of *Arrow of God* revolve around liminality where actions, decisions, conflicts, etc., take root from this concept of the 'barely perceptible' sensory threshold of being and un-being. In this context, the actuations, manoeuvres, and manipulations on the metaphysical and spiritual plane are largely causative. Ezeulu is half-man, half-spirit. His deity, the anthropomorphous Ulu is totally on the spiritual plane; the adversarial deity, Idemili is also on the same plane as Ulu; the fatal blow of Obika's death occurs when he is on the liminal plane in the Ogbazuluobodo mask, etc. These major and decisive aspects of the novel all root in one way or the other in the metaphysical.

The dislocations, that is, the disruptions of established order(s) in the community and on spiritual planes and the personal disintegration of Ezeulu's person and psyche can all be interestingly linked to what this paper describes as liminal dislocations. Ezeulu's decision to send Oduche into Christianity yields its first rotten fruit as the overzealous lad imprisons the sacred python; totem of Idemili and Ezidemili, rivals to Ulu and Ezeulu. This is not a light issue. According to Achebe (1964:44):

Ezeulu's neighbour, Anosi, who was passing by branched in, and soon a big crowd had gathered. In the broken box lay an exhausted royal python.
'May the Great Deity forbid,' said Anosi.
'An abomination has happened,' said Akueke.

To buttress the seriousness, Achebe continues: "The outrage which Ezeulu's son committed against the sacred python was a very serious matter; Ezeulu was the first to admit it" (Ibid, 59). This was like a cue for things to come: that the white man is bent on destroying their values with his teachings and colonial might. According to Moses, "As daylight chases away darkness so will the white man drive away all our customs" (Ibid, 84).

Ezeulu's continued actions do not help matters. True to his antecedents of obstinacy, he refuses to budge and change stances. He is obviously goaded on by his belief in his far-seeing spirit nature. When he is confronted by his friend Akuebue on his decisions that do not augur well with the community, he answers:

Do you think you can drive him (the white man) away by blaming Ezeulu? You may try, and the day I hear that you have succeeded I shall come and shake your hand. I have my own way and I shall follow it. I can see things where other men are blind. That is why I am Known and at the same time I am Unknowable I can see tomorrow; (Ibid, 132)

Eventually, the die is cast; and the tensions, communal (Umuaro) and individual (Ezeulu) become taut. In a revelatory dream during his detention by Winterbottom in Okperi, his downfall and destruction is confirmed as the fatal liminal dislocation precipitates dangerously towards a tragic end: the community rejects Ulu and Ezeulu.

That night Ezeulu saw in a dream a big assembly of Umuaro elders, the same people he had spoken to a few days earlier. But instead of himself it was his grandfather who rose up to speak to them. They

refused to listen. They shouted together: *He shall not speak; we will not listen to him...* Then the people seized the Chief Priest who had changed from Ezeulu's grandfather to himself and began to push him from one group to another. Some spat on his face and called him the priest of a dead god (Ibid, 159).

The incursion of the white man armed with Christianity and government, Ezeulu's pride and obstinacy, the ontologically rooted Idemili and anthropomorphic Ulu's rivalry, Ezeulu and Ezidemili's contentions, and the whirlwind of changing times all contributed to the inevitable dislocation of the community fabric and ancestral rooting.

Ezeulu himself fares worse as everything he stands for on behalf of his forefathers - god and community become doomed. At this point, this plethora of apocalyptic troubles becomes too much for the community's liminal strands to resist and Ezeulu will eventually take the personal responsibility. According to an Igbo saying, "When a dog gets confounded, it attacks even its master"; and the 'dogs' of the story: Ulu, Ezeulu, and Umuaro are all set on the tragic course of an implosive and self-destructive path of misplaced retribution(s).

Confounded Rabidity and Retributions

Rabid dogs are prone to being confounded and the Igbo proverb captures the literal and metaphorical picture aptly. Retribution in this context follows quite naturally. The confused Umuaro community could not fathom the rationale behind Ezeulu's decision to send one of his sons to the white man's religion. Even Akuebue his friend doubted his wisdom in such a decision. The people were asking:

If the Chief Priest of Ulu could send his son among people who kill and eat the sacred python and commit other evils what did he expect ordinary men and women to do? The lizard who threw confusion into his mother's funeral rite did he expect outsiders to carry the burden of honouring his dead? (125)

Contextually, Umuaro people could not fathom the situation. Akuebue tried his best to convince Ezeulu to change most of his antagonistic stances against Umuaro. He even warned him through a popular Igbo adage and said "but you forget one thing: that no man however great can win judgement against a clan" (131). He was referring to the land dispute with Okperi where Ezeulu stood alone in testifying against his own people; and he added: "Umuaro will always say that you betrayed them before the white man. And they will say that you are betraying them again today by sending your son to join in desecrating the land" (131).

Confusing issues continue as Ezeulu's refusal to accept the white man's request to be chief turns to a slight; inexplicable to Winterbottom. In frustration he tells Clarke, his A.D.O., "you are to lock him up in the guardroom. I do not wish to see him until after my return from Enugu" (140). Another perplexing cause-and-effect instance bordering on juju which Achebe deftly handles leaving the reader to guess what exactly happened, occurs thus:

Perhaps it was Captain Winterbottom's rage and frenzy that brought it on; perhaps his steward was right about its cause. But on that very morning when two policemen set out to arrest Ezeulu in Umuaro

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Captain Winterbottom suddenly collapsed and went into a delirium.
(149)

Apart from Achebe and his character Ezeulu, every other person including the reader is left to depend on his personal beliefs and convictions to either believe like the steward that Ezeulu was responsible through juju for Winterbottom's illness, or disbelieve such tales and happenstances. For Achebe himself, he maintains his authorial ambivalence and non-contrivance by simply saying 'perhaps'. All the same, the confounding runs from the text to the reader.

Subsequently and interestingly, confusions reach a structural and meaningfully vocal climax as voiced by Okofa when he visited Ezeulu to welcome him from his detention in Okperi. His statement summarizes the latent mood and situation of both the community and the text, courtesy of Ezeulu. He says:

The elders of Umuaro are confused. You can say that Okofa told you so. We are confused. We are like the puppy in the proverb which attempted to answer two calls at once and broke its jaw. First you, Ezeulu, told us five years ago that it was foolish to defy the white man... you were right. But just as we were beginning to learn our lesson you turn round and tell us to go and challenge the same white man. What did you expect us to do? (188)

The seeds of retribution were ready to germinate from the outset of the refusal of Umuaro to come to Ezeulu's aid as most of the community was already swayed by Nwaka who was backed by Ezidemili, the chief priest of Ulu's rival deity, Idemili. The confusions earlier plotted into the story give rise to events that allow Ezeulu to plot revenge; something he does with glee while in detention. His thoughts bare them all: "But his greatest pleasure came from the thought of his revenge which had suddenly formed in his mind as he had sat listening to Nwaka in the market place" (160). He plans his revenge to involve liminal forces as he weaves in the vengeance of the community's deity against its own people. He turns the detention into an issue the god would intervene retributively for Umuaro's abandonment of a god's supposed 'arrow' – Ezeulu. His mind was set for revenge. "Ezeulu's muscles tingled for the fight. Let the white man detain him not for one day but for one year so that his deity not seeing him in his place would ask Umuaro questions" (160). Akuebue offers further insight into Ezeulu's character and resolve on vengeance when he says, "He knew that it was not beyond him to die abroad so as to plague his enemies at home" (165).

When Ezeulu was released by Winterbottom, without his compliance to the administration, the community saw it as a victory for Ezeulu. This triumph further bolstered his pride and resolve as a warrior and as someone who never backs out of a fight. It further provides a glimpse of his adamant, contentious and belligerent temperament. He says: "I prefer to deal with a man who throws up a stone and puts his head to receive it not one who shouts for a fight but when it comes he trembles and passes premature shit" (179). He further makes up his mind, reinforced by his victory over the white man: "I am going home to challenge all those who have been poking their fingers into my face to come outside their gate and meet me in combat and whoever throws the other will strip him of his anklet" (179).

Ezeulu's state of mind bent on revenge had become so fixated that he momentarily ceases to be a custodian of culture as he enjoys the misfortune of their dying traditions and weakened totems. This shouldn't be, even if the desecrated or harassed totems belonged to a rival deity. Being the chief priest of the main god of Umuaro, it behoves him to support the

survival of all traditional elements sacred to their community. Instead, he enjoys the scandal of the python:

‘We were saying: Python, run! There is a Christian here’
‘And what does that mean?’
‘Akwuba told us that a python runs away as soon as it hears that.’
Ezeulu broke into a long, loud laughter.
‘Did it run away when you said it?’
‘it ran away *fiam* like an ordinary snake.’ (205)

Unknown to Ezeulu apparently, the tragedy of Christianity running their traditional religion and gods to the ground would not be a light issue for amusement. It would turn out to be devastating, disastrous, and tragic; on the individual and the community.

Wormwoods of Tragedy

If the metaphysical and spiritual planes of liminality in Umuaro did not suffer dislocation(s), key persons, gods and issues wouldn't have been confounded. There wouldn't have been retributions arising from misunderstood issues and the tragedies arising from rabid dogs biting even their masters would have been averted: Ezeulu attacking Umuaro and disobeying Ulu, Ulu attacking Ezeulu and abandoning the community, Umuaro in turn abandoning Ulu and Ezeulu, and the Christians reaping where the house had collapsed on itself therefore becomes inevitable.

In the text, the dangerous dive to destruction starts when Ezeulu refuses to eat the sacred yams and announces the New Yam in order to allow people harvest and forestall famine. He already sees himself as the perfect arrow in Ulu's bow; the perfect vengeance tool. But he says: “it could not be my wish to ruin all these people. It could not be my wish to make the smallest man in Umuaro suffer. But this is not my doing. The gods sometimes use us as a whip” (208). By this time people were suffering in hunger and the elders had paid him a visit pleading and pledging to take the responsibility of the sacrilege of eating the yams in quick succession so as to save the people. Ezeulu was busy exacting revenge. Ofoka confronts him: “But I would 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...” (209). From then, suffering and tragedy set in.

The last pages of the novel are fraught with the tragedies of disintegration of Umuaro's religious values: the Christians intervening in the gridlock by promising protection and accepting their yam offerings, erstwhile hardcore traditional elders sending their children to church, the personal tragedy of the downfall of Ulu, the death of Ezeulu's favorite son, Obika, and Ezeulu's eventual madness. The unfortunate liminal upset became a total tragedy for Umuaro. As Achebe said elsewhere, “Tragedy... is like a bowl of wormwood, which one sips a little at a time world without end.”

Whenever there is change, the kind that dislocates liminalities and confounds people, fosters confusion and precipitates tragedy, it is akin, according to W. B. Yeats, to a “Turning and turning in the widening gyre/the falcon cannot hear the falconer...”; except that for the Igbo it is not the falconer that is affected greatly by the disconnect, it is the dog who gets confounded and attacks even its owner.

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