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Three Circles of Reality in Chinua Achebe's "Arrow of God"

Chinua Achebe's novels¹ make a lasting impression as a crystallization of three different sets of reality. At the focal point of each novel is a single main character, forceful, perplexed or defeated, but always the core of reality at its most moving, personal level. These individuals realize themselves within a strong community life, and the second reality is the inescapable interaction between them as individuals and the constellation of forces that has formed them and out of which they have emerged. Finally, as the novel proceeds we become aware of an even more inescapable reality, that of forces outside individual and community, shaping both, yet hardly to be affected by either.

These realities are present in differing intensity in all four of Achebe's novels but they are realized most fully and with greatest complexity in his third novel *Arrow of God* and in the central character of that novel, Achebe's most fully tragic hero, Ezeulu, the priest of the moon god Ulu.

Complexity in Achebe is not primarily linguistic, nevertheless the simplicity of the language which he uses is deceptive. Much of it is a rendering of Ibo speech into English and provides a special kind of formal simplicity with rich cultural undertones which has something of the effect of poetry. Thus his language is a perfect medium for the special amalgam of personal and cultural tensions within which the characters move, and because these tensions are confined neither to

¹ *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966). Chinua Achebe is Nigeria's best-known novelist and probably the best known writer of fiction from black Africa. He is an Ibo, and was born in Eastern Nigeria in 1930. He was one of the first students to take the full degree course at the University of Ibadan. His formal education was entirely in English and he writes in English.

Nigeria, nor to Africa, Achebe's novels about the six Ibo villages of Umuaro and the people who have been formed by them are as compelling a reflection of certain aspects of common reality as are those of William Golding writing about boys on a desert island in the Pacific.

The first two thirds of *Arrow of God* move at a lieisurely pace which allows Achebe to establish the dense reality of Ibo civilization, and with it the credibility of Ezeulu in his dual role as Man and Man-Spirit. Had he not done this with such assurance the impact of the last third of the novel, which moves much faster and is set within a different frame of reference, would have been far less powerful.

Ulu, the moon god whom Ezeulu serves regulates life at a very simple level, but Achebe recreates this life so completely that Ibo civilization is seen as dignified and ordered, with its own ceremonies, customs and ethics, its own jealousies and ambitions and ways of dealing with them, its own social life, its own communal psychological needs and ways of providing for them. The community life of the villages is established by such gatherings as the ceremony of purification before the planting season:

The market place was filling up steadily as men and women poured into it from every quarter. Because it was specially their day, the women wore their finest cloths and ornaments of ivory and beads according to the wealth of their husbands or, in a few exceptional cases, the strength of their own arms. Most of the men brought palm wine in pots carried on the head or gourds dangling by the side from a loop of rope. The first people to arrive took up positions under the shade of trees and began to drink with their friends, their relations and their in-laws. Those who came after sat in the open which was not hot yet . . .

Ezeulu's younger wife examined her hair in a mirror held between her thighs. She could not help feeling that she did a better job on Akueke's hair than Akueke did on hers. But she was very pleased with the black patternes of *uli* and faint yellow lines of *ogalu* on her body. In previous years she would have been among the first to arrive at the market place; she would have been carefree and joyful. But this year her feet seemed to drag because of the load on her mind. She was going to pray for the cleansing of her hut which Oduche had defiled. She was no longer one of many, many Umuaro women taking part in a general and all-embracing rite. Today she stood in special need. The weight of this feeling all but crushed the long-awaited pleasure of wearing her new ivory bracelets which had earned her so much envy and hostility from her husband's other wife, Matefi.²

Life in the six villages is presented too in more intimate family scenes, such as the morning that the new bride of

² Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, 1964, ch. 7, Heinemann African Writers Series pp. 82-83. All further quotations are from this edition.

Ezeulu's oldest son goes to draw water, and every child in the compound wants to go to the stream to draw water too, because their new wife is going. It is seen in meetings and discussions of the men which are preceded by breaking of kolonuts together and the drawing of lines of the floor.

Political life, personal rivalry and the ambitions on which these are based become vivid in descriptions of village meetings. One such is that at which Umuaro decides to dispute the ownership of land with the neighbouring village of Okperi, and if necessary to go to war with them. The two main spokesmen at the meeting are forceful individuals who represent different elements in village life. On one side is Ezeulu both the repository of tradition and the seer of the future, on the other Nwaka, a man favoured by the god of riches and a man of standing and power. Ezeulu speaks first and says that he knows from his own father, who was chief priest before him, that the disputed farmland was never the property of Umuaro. He finishes his speech with the warning that if Umuaro fights a war for the land it will be a war of blame and Ulu will not be with them. Nwaka speaks after him and uses all his oratorical power, demagogic tricks and political insinuation to lead the villages to war. The latter part of the scene is worth quoting at some length for it shows Achebe's rendering of Ibo speech and the intermeshing of politics and private attitudes.

Nwaka carried the day. He was one of the three people in all the six villages who had taken the highest title in the land, Eru, which was called after the lord of wealth himself. Nwaka came from a long line of prosperous men and from a village which called itself first in Umuaro. They said that when the six villages first came together they offered the priesthood of Ulu to the weakest among them lest it became too powerful.

"Umuaro kvenu!" Nwaka roared.

"Hem!" replied the men of Umuaro.

"Kwnu!!"

"Hem!"

"Kwezuenu!!"

"Hem!"

He began to speak almost softly in the silence he had created with his salutation.

"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...". There were murmurs of approval and of disapproval but more of approval from the assembly of elders and men of title...

...let us not tell ourselves or our children that the land belonged to other people. Let us rather tell them that their fathers did not choose to fight. Let us tell them also that we marry the daughters of Okperi and their men marry our daughters, and

that where there is this mingling men often lose the heart to fight. Umuaro Kwenu!"

"Hem!"

"Kwezuenu!"

"Hem!"

"I salute you all."

The long uproar that followed was largely of approbation. Nwaka had totally destroyed Ezeulu's speech. The last glancing blow which killed it was the hint that the Chief Priest's mother had been a daughter of Okperi. The assembly broke up into numerous little groups of people talking to those who sat nearest to them. One man said that Ezeulu had forgotten whether it was his father or his mother who told him about the farmland. Speaker after speaker rose and spoke to the assembly until it was clear that all the six villages stood behind Nwaka. Ezeulu was not the only man of Umuaro whose mother had come from Okperi. But none of the others dared go to his support. In fact one of them, Akukalia, whose language never wandered far from 'kill and despoil', was so fiery that he was chosen to carry the white clay and the new palm frond to his motherland, Okperi.³

Okperi, the village where the choice must be made of the palm of war or the white chalk of peace, also comes alive. As the young men go on their journey they pass people toiling to market with pots and baskets on their heads, there is the excitement and exhaustion of market day and the fact that there is no one of standing to take the message of war or peace because Okperi is a more civilized village than backward Umuaro and all the people are engaged in market business.

So much during the first two-thirds of the novel do we come to see Ibo life from the inside, and so much are we identified with it that the views of the white men on government hill produce a jolt. The district officer, Winterbottom, when he tells his version of the story of the fight between Umuaro and Okperi for the farmland, oversimplifies it so grossly that we are not just shocked by the wrongness of his facts but by his total misapprehension of the whole affair. Thus when he produces his famous indoctrination anecdote to his newly arrived second in command

When you've been here as long as Allen was and understood the native a little more you might modify some of your new theories. If you saw, as I did, a man buried alive up to his neck with a piece of roast yam on his head to attract vultures, you might have second thoughts.⁴

his approach seems an irrelevance for measuring the life and the preoccupations in which we have become immersed by Achebe's establishment of the life of the villages as a culture slowly evolving according to simple natural laws.

³ Ch. 1, pp. 18—20.

⁴ Ch. 3, p. 43.

Even more important than the establishment of the community life of Umuaro is the presentation of Ezeulu in both his personal and community roles. Had he not rooted Ezeulu so firmly in ordinary daily reality his subsequent fate would not have made the effect it does. On the personal level Ezeulu emerges as a father with favourites and unfavourites among his children.

Obika [Ezeulu's oldest son] was one of the handsomest young men in Umuaro and all the surrounding districts. His face was very finely cut... People said of him (as they always did when they saw great comelines) that he was not born for these parts...

But two things spoilt Obika. He drank palm wine to excess and he was given to sudden and fiery anger. And being as strong as rock he was always inflicting injury on others. His father who preferred him to Edogo, his quiet and brooding half-brother, nevertheless said to him often: "It is praiseworthy to be brave and fearless, my son, but sometimes it is better to be a coward. We often stand in the compound of a coward to point at the ruins where a brave man used to live..."

But for all that Ezeulu would rather have a sharp hoy who broke utensils in his haste than a slow and careful snail.⁵

The gradations of Ezeulu's affection, not only between his two sons, but also between them and their brothers, Odouche and Nwafe, have important later repercussions in the novel. Ezeulu is shown as a man still potent, who can lie with his wives, as a man enraged with the wife who continually brings the meals late, a man who carefully makes fire for the cooking of the ceremonial yam that he eats each new moon, and according to which he tells the month of the year. He emerges as someone intimate and human yet at the same time remote, as a man who falls into special moods of restlessness when it is idle to ask him questions, a man who "even at the best of times only spoke when he wanted to and not when people asked him".

It is this remoteness, this apartness, that shows Ezeulu as the leader. I am at the same time "Known and Unknowable", he tells his old friend Akuebue, "half Man half Spirit". He is only in part the husband of wives and the father of their children, the governor of life in his own compound, or the counsellor of the village in ordinary matters. He is in part a channel for the guidance of the life of the community according to the natural laws that make their existence possible, and allow for the fulfilment of the emotional, communal needs that give it meaning. We are presented with Ezeulu in his role of priest at the very opening of the novel.

⁵ Ch. 1, p. 12—13.

This was the third nightfall since he began to look for signs of the new moon. He knew it would come today but he always began his watch three days before its time because he must not take a risk. In this season of the year his task was not too difficult; he did not have to peer and search the sky as he might do in the rainy season. Then the new moon sometimes hid itself for many days behind rain clouds so that when it finally came out it was already half grown. And while it played its game the Chief Priest sat up every evening waiting.⁶

For an understanding of Ezeulu's role in the novel a passage a little further on in the same chapter is of great importance. For when Ezeulu has perceived the new moon with which the novel opens he sits considering the nature of the power of a priest and reflects that a priest is not a god. This may injure the pride of the priest, he may not even be willing to accept that it is so, yet his task is only to reveal the power of his god, he does not wield that power.

Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real. 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 the day. He was merely a watchman.⁷

The thought that there is something which he, Ezeulu, cannot do, does not dare to do, stings him to momentary revolt. But basically, when he considers the nature of his power he knows that he is only a channel for outside forces. The half of him that is spirit is guided by his perception of the forces that control the lives of the community of which he is part. It is his task as priest to translate the messages of the gods, i. e. those outside forces, into effective human action. In what he does he is largely guided by the settled pageant of tradition and the passing seasons, largely guided that is by gods such as Ulu who are bound up with these traditional seasonal ceremonies and rites. But also, because of his special sensitivity to outer forces, because to be aware of such forces is his vocation, he is able to perceive realities and powers beyond the world of Ulu. What exactly these are he is not himself fully conscious. This can be seen from an important scene in which Ezeulu talks to Akuebue, one of the wisest elders of the village:

"... 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. You are my friend and you know whether I am a thief or a murderer or an honest man. *But you cannot know the Thing which beats the drum to which Ezeulu*

⁶ Ch. 1, p. 1.

⁷ Ch. 1, p. 3.

dances. I can see tomorrow; that is why I can tell Umuaro; come out from this because there is death, there or do this because there is profit in it. If they listen to me, o-o; if they refuse to listen, o-o. I have passed the stage of dancing to receive presents...⁸

We can know whether our friends are honest or dishonest according to community standards. But we cannot know especially with men of complex mission like Ezeulu, to what music they are dancing. As the novel progresses we realize that it is not only Akuebue who does not know the "Thing which beats the drum to which Ezeulu dances," Ezeulu does not know himself.

The novel takes us through a single year in the life of Umuaro, with flashbacks to a period five years earlier, and as events develop we realize that Ezeulu is dancing to more than one kind of music. Primarily he is being influenced by what he knows from tradition the present society needs. But this is not all. He is also guided by what, with his special instinctual sensitivity, he feels that it may need in the future. In his composition of "half-Man, half-Spirit" he thinks of the half-Man side as that which lives in the village the half-Spirit side as that which transmits the messages of Ulu. In fact both these functions come from his half-Man side. His half-Spirit side is becoming the interpreter of things beyond Ulu. He is becoming the instrument of much more potent forces which will affect the life of the six villages in different and more complex ways than those in which Ulu and the simple forces of nature and tradition guide them.

At certain special festivals the gods of Umuoro manifest themselves as masked spirits. At the spirit dances everyone in Umuaro knows that the masks, or spirits, are carried by men. But when men take on the masks of spirits they cease to be men and become the power of the spirits that they represent. In the last third of the novel, the third which moves Ezeulu and Umuaro into reality of a different kind, the thought is introduced that perhaps "the white men are the masked spirits of today".⁹

The idea of the white men as masked spirits, that is as the forms through which the forces guiding human destiny are made manifest, presents a variety of possibilities. The actual white men of the novel Winterbottom, Clarke and Wright suppose that the forces that they represent are those of civilization in the form of better roads, village intercommunication, better and more humane laws, a more rational and modern form of life. What they have most obviously brought

⁸ Ch. 12, p. 163 (italics mine SB)

⁹ Ch. 13, p. 190.

is a money economy, opportunities for individual self-betterment, the doubtful benefits of a power umbrella which can be used to shelter local political forces which they have themselves created and the new god of the Christian church. The results are not conspicuously identical with the aims of civilization which the white man have formulated and about which they preach

Smaller and more practical people than Ezeulu make full use of the money elements that the white man has brought with him and which allow prestige to be based on a new form of social organization. There is John Nwodika, for example: who tells of the advice given to him, and why he has become the servant of Winterbottom:

"How did I come to work for the white man? I should say that my *chi* planned that it should be so. I did not know anything about the white man at the time... It will be three years next dry season. My age mates and I came from Umunneora to Okperi to learn a new dance as we had done far many years in the dry season after the harvest. To my great astonishment I found that my friend called Ekemezie... was no longer among the dancers of Okperi... But the next day Ekemezie came to see me ... He called me by name and I answered. He said that everything was good in its season; dancing in the season of dancing. But, he said, a man of sense does not go on hunting little bush rodents when his age mates are after big game. He told me to leave dancing and join in the race for the white man's money... He said the race for the white man's money would not wait till tomorrow or till we were ready to join; ... He said other people from every small clan — some people we used to despise — they were all now in high favour when our own people did not even know that day had broken...

... "So my brothers", continued Nwodika's son, "that was how your brother came to work for the white man. ... I do not aim to die a servant. My eye is on starting a small trade in tobacco as soon as I have collected a little money. People from other places are gathering much wealth in this trade and in trade for cloth. ... they control the great new market. They decide what goes on there."¹⁰

Less scrupulous people than Ezeulu use the power given them by the white man to build themselves up into positions of local power and with it wealth and exploitation, they set up illegal courts and private prisons and receive presents of goats and yams for themselves and those working with them. They exercise the invetable small-time corruption of people sheltered by someone higher up in a centralized hierarchy.

People who are connected with the formal religious powers of the white men's god, and along with it the assertion of their own importance as the Lord's servant, are concerned with swelling the religious community, with religious education

¹⁰ Ch. 14, pp. 208—210.

and the stamping out of alien rites such as that connected with Ulu and with the sacred python, Ulu's rival diety in the six villages.

Ezeulu stands apart from these not only and not primarily because he is more personally proud and honest, but because he divines the powers that stand behind the white men within a wider frame of reference. We see him feeling towards the meaning of something of which he is only half conscious during his talks with his third son, Oduche, when he decides to send him to the white man's school.

"Oduche sat on the mud-bed and faced his father. After a short pause Ezeulu spoke direct and to the point. He reminded Oduche of the importance of knowing what the white man knew. "I have sent you to be my eyes there. Do not listen to what people say — people who do not know their right from their left. No man speaks a lie to his son; I have told you that before. If anyone asks you why you should be sent to learn these new things tell him that a man must dance the dance prevalent in his time". He scratched his head and continued in a relaxed voice. "When I was in Okperi I saw a young white man who was able to write his book with the left hand. From his actions I could see that he had very little sense. But he had power; ... That is why I have called you. I want you to learn and master this man's knowledge so much that if you are suddenly woken up from sleep and asked what it is you will reply. You must learn it until you can write it with your left hand."¹¹

And in another talk with Oduche he says:

"The world is changing," ... "I do not like it. But I am like the bird Eneke-nti-oba. When his friends asked him why he was always on the wing he replied: "Men of today have learned to shoot without missing and so I have learned to fly without perching." I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stay in one place."¹²

In his several brief encounters with the white men Ezeulu has come to an obscure perception of the power of the gods, that is the outside forces, of which the white men are the masked spirits. He knows what Oduche must learn from them. It is not money he is interested in nor a position of power within his community as servant of the white gods, though that is what his enemies, think interests, him. What Oduche must bring back with him from his study of the white men's ways is above all knowledge, knowledge so completely mastered that it exists even in the sleeping mind and can be written with the left hand.

¹¹ Ch. 16, p. 233—234.

¹² Ch. 4, p. 55.

The action which starts the final stage of the novel, and which inexorably moves Ezeulu and the six villages into the reality of the powers behind the white man's world, begins when Winterbottom decides to make Ezeulu a warrant chief. He sends messengers to the village to summon the priest to Okperi for this purpose. There is a serious failure of communication at this point on both linguistic and cultural levels. At linguistic level because of the way in which the messengers transmit their message, and at cultural level because of the way Winterbottom has presented it, and the way he reacts to Ezeulu's refusal to obey it. Since we see the whole incident from the point of view of Umuaro Ezeulu's refusal to accept the white man's peremptory invitation to wait on him at Okperi seems perfectly reasonable. The priest's grounds for going later, on his own terms and in the interests of the villages, are so convincing that Winterbottom's reaction in sending messengers with handcuffs to have Ezeulu brought prisoner to Okperi produces the same shock of revulsion that Winterbottom's story had done earlier.

In fact Ezeulu had left of his own volition before the messengers arrived, and with his lonely departure on foot, accompanied only by his son, the action of the novel gradually begins to take on a more urgent pace. Ezeulu goes to confront the white man unaccompanied by any of the village elders. The meaning behind the white man's summons must be evaluated by him alone. He knows that one of those moments has come into which he must go by himself. But he "was used to loneliness". During his musings about the nature of his power he had come to realize that "as chief Priest he had always walked alone in front of Umuaro".¹³ The leader had to go ahead.

The end of the journey to Okperi is the beginning of Ezeulu's personal ordeal. He is imprisoned by the white man who intends to keep him in custody until he shall have learned how to cooperate with the administration, that is, to accept the offer to be created a warrant chief through whom white laws can be exercised. The journey has freed Ezeulu from the small bonds of everyday life. Imprisonment is accompanied by a feeling not of restriction but of release. He is aware of being a small part of a larger pattern of events, and in prison he has moments of contemplation which reinforce his realization of being worked upon by strong powers outside himself. The first of such moments comes in visionary form.

"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

¹³ Ch. 19, p. 273.

instead of himself it was his grandfather who rose up to speak to them. They refused to listen. They shouted together: "He will not speak; we shall not listen to him." The Chief Priest raised his voice and pleaded with them to listen but they refused saying that they must bale the water while it was still only ankle-deep. "Why should we rely on him to tell us the season of the year?" asked Nwaka. "Is there anybody here who cannot see the moon in his own compound? And anyhow what is the power of Ulu today? He saved our fathers from the warriors of Abam but he cannot save us from the white man. Let us drive him away..." 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.

Ezeulu woke up with a start as though he had fallen from a great height...

He was sitting up on his mat. What he had just seen was not a dream but a vision.¹⁴

This vision with its insistence on gods of the past and gods that are no longer powerful, and on the possibility of each man divining for himself what the gods have to say, provides a whole orchestration of tunes to which Ezeulu must find a fitting dance even though the relative importance of the interwoven strands may as yet elude him. He provides two interpretations of this vision. One is on the rational level that his "half-Man" side provides, the other is on the instinctual level of his "half-Spirit" side. These interpretations only become apparent later in the development of the action. At first Ezeulu is filled with a mixture of elation and foreboding.

He is suddenly released from prison, for reasons of white policy of which he is unaware. He returns to Umuaro through the drenching rain of a tropical storm which both cleanses and intoxicates him, and when he gets back to Umuaro he still continues to live in the state of release, vision and the presence of outside forces into which he had entered during his time of physical imprisonment. Among his first acts is to put into practice the interpretation that he had rationally given to his vision. This is, that Ulu wishes to punish the six villages because during the absence of their priest they have begun to think again of the python rites which Ulu superceded. A strong element of personal rivalry is worked in here for the python rites are supported by Nwaka. Since Ezeulu's period of imprisonment had lasted three months, he had missed three ceremonial yam eatings, thus Ulu's year, as reckoned in yams, must go on for three moons more. And so, on his return, Ezeulu refuses to name the usual day for the feast of the new yam, upon the harvesting of which at its proper time the health and prosperity of the villages depend.

¹⁴ Ch. 14, pp. 196—197.

In taking this action Ezeulu is doing something that is not in line with his powers as priest, he is acting as a god, the one who chooses the day, not as a priest, the one who only names the day. The results are terrible on both the personal and the community level. The villagers are likely to starve, and even children in their mother's bellies take sides in the issue. As a direct result of his action Ezeulu loses the son in whom he took most pride, and who, to show that the whole family is not implicated in the village curse runs in a spirit festival although he has a fever, and dies of his incredible exertions. The first results of Ezeulu's rational interpretation of his vision are thus hunger in Amauru and the loss of his son. Its next results are to turn the villages to the white man's god, and to destroy their faith in Ulu.

The news spread that anyone who did not want to wait and see all his harvest ruined could take his offering to the god of the Christians who claimed to have power to protect such a person from the anger of Ulu. Such a story at other times might have been treated with laughter. But there was no more laughter left in the people.¹⁵

It might be inferred from the passage where Ezeulu goes into the shrine of Ulu to see if he can hear the voice of his god revoking his decision to punish the six villages that Ulu himself desires to turn the village to the Christian god. For as Ezeulu stands vacantly in the inner sanctuary of the shrine, always chill because of the great cold underground river flowing beneath it, he hears nothing but the bell of Oduche's people (i.e. the Christian community) and thinks how strange that it should sound so near, much nearer than it did in his own compound. The sound of the bell of the white man's god within the inner shrine might suggest that Ulu had divined the Christian god as the saviour of the community. This does remain one possible interpretation of the story. But it is very far from catching the full orchestration of the novel. In this context the last passage is significant:

Thereafter any yam that was harvested in the man's fields was harvested in the name of the son

Had Achebe desired to leave us with the restricted religious interpretation then the last passage would surely have run:

Thereafter any yam harvested in the man's fields was harvested in the name of the Son.

The change to the Christian god could not have been the spirit's intent, or at any rate not his full intent, and Ezeulu's

¹⁵ Ch. 18, p. 270.

subconscious interpretation of his vision in prison has already provided other possibilities. Here the title *Arrow of God* is significant. At bottom Ezeulu knows well that he cannot do anything in defiance of the powers outside him. He knows himself to be no more than an arrow in the bow of a god. The priests and the leaders who go before the people are only the channels of communication for forces shaped within wider contexts of human action over which neither individuals nor communities nor leaders themselves have ultimate control.

We know that Ezeulu interprets the power of which the white men are the masked spirits not as laws, roads, new institutions, but as knowledge. Interprets them, that is, as an understanding of the shaping forces of which laws, institutions and gods are only the visible manifestations. Once more the priest must go before the people, once more his spirit must hear faint strains of music which it cannot clearly comprehend:

“...It was a fight of the gods. He was no more than an arrow in the bow his god. This thought intoxicated Ezeulu like palm wine. New thoughts tumbled over themselves and past events took on new and exciting significance. Why had Oduche imprisoned a python in his box? It had been blamed on the white man's religion; but was that the true cause? What if the boy was also an arrow in the hand of Ulu?

And what about the white man's religion and even the white man himself? This was close on profanity but Ezeulu was now in a mood to follow things through. Yes, what about the white man himself? ...

If Ulu had spotted the white man as an ally from the very beginning, it would explain many things. It would explain Ezeulu's decision to send Oduche to learn the ways of the white man. It was true Ezeulu had given other explanations for his decision but those were the thoughts that had come into his head at the time. One half of him was man and the other half *mmo* — the half that was painted over with white chalk at important religious moments. And half of the things he over did were done by this spirit side.¹⁶

The Spirit discerns things that the Man cannot. If people “listen to him o-o. If they do not again o-o.” Sometimes the leader is filled only with the power of discernment not the power to translate it into concrete action, because the things done by the spirit side are not done consciously. Ezeulu has been launched from the bow of more complex forces that those either of Ulu or the God of the Christians. In his imaginative flights he is impelled by powers beyond those of any narrowly identifiable god.

This should not suggest that Achebe provides a simplistic approach. Nothing is further from the truth. *Arrow of God* came between *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*.

¹⁶ Ch. 17, p. 241.

Both of these show that no one is more aware than Achebe of the precarious position of those who come from the world of Ulu and move into the world of which the white men are the masked spirits. The pity of the tragedy this may mean at the personal level is shown in *No Longer at Ease*. The corruption and impoverishment that it may imply is shown in *A Man of the People*. To suppose that Achebe underrated the tensions involved at any moment of his work is to underrate him as novelist.

Because Ezeulu has taken the action that his spirit side dictates the life in Umuaro, in the days of the sons, will inevitably be a different and there will no longer be a place in it for the discredited priest of a discredited god. In setting in motion the forces that will destroy the old gods Ezeulu has at the same time set in motion the forces which will destroy him. This he also saw in his vision. He has become a culture hero who must be sacrificed in the name of the forces to come. He provides a suitable metaphor for the times to come which shows Achebe to be deluded by no ideas of simplicity, or even the idea of a perfectly right choice:

Do you not know
in a great man's household there must be people who follow
all kinds of strange ways? There must be good people and bad
people, honest workers and thieves, peace makers and destroyers.
That is the mark of the great obi. In such a place whatever music
you beat on your drum there is somebody who can dance to it.¹⁷

The tune is there. The people will dance to it as they hear it and as they are able to dance. It will be a more complicated world than Ulu's.

The movement of the novel is from reality at the personal and restricted community level out to a wider range of reality, yet the three are intermeshed throughout and in our final recollections it is the personal tragedy of the individual that leaves the most indelible impression. This is true of all four of Achebe's novels, the focus is on human tragedy at the personal level. Ezeulu never knows what he has done. He ends his days as a demented high priest, unaware of the forces by which he has been used as an arrow.

¹⁷ Ch. 5, p. 56.