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Culture and Language in African Literature: An Appraisal of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*

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Abstract

There is a symbiotic relationship between language, culture and literature as each reinforces, projects and distils the other (Adedimeji, 2005). The need for the projection of African culture has thus informed the development of modern African literature which serves to enlighten, educate and showcase the African world-view, practices and problems. Against the Conradian misinformed notion of Africans as a people without culture, this paper discusses aspects of African cultural values highlighted in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*. The artistic dexterity of Achebe as a leading African literary icon is examined as he weaves African culture into English language in a novel that has re-constructed and corrected in a compelling story the subjective portrayal of Africa, the cradle of civilization, as a *heart of darkness*. The paper discusses the thematic, cultural and linguistic patterns of *Arrow of God* as a powerful literary canon from Africa by an African conscious of his immediate and remote environments.

Keywords: Igbo culture, African literature, Achebe's language, themes.

1. Introduction

Culture is a dynamic phenomenon encompassing the totality of attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and world-views. It is an integral part of every human society and all social groups are characterized by it. In other words, it is that "complex pattern of behaviour and material achievement which are produced, learned and shared by members of a community" (Ameh, 2002: 165). Basic to the meaning of culture is a sense of refinement that being "cultured" suggests. Every human community has its distinctive cultural patterns through which the totality of *what, how, where* and *when* of being in a context is known. One crucial part of culture is language as every culture has a language that best expresses it: there is no culture without a linguistic basis. The statement is still true when it is reversed: there is no *natural* language without a cultural foundation.

Given the foregoing definitions of culture, it appears curious, if not mischievous, to assume that a human society does not have (a) culture. This apparent misinformation or disparaging distortion incidentally contributed to the emergence of written African literature. By literature, we mean any piece of writing that expresses human experience and feelings through imagination. This

...becomes African when it addresses aspects of African life, society, geography and experience, regardless of whatever language in which it is written. Chinua Achebe, who bestrides African literary landscape like a colossus, thought that Africa had no culture while he studied Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, two colonial works that rate Africans as sub-human race. The profound influence of Conrad's novel on Achebe's artistic mission and the author's uncanny character assassination of Africans has been discussed in Achebe's essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (Achebe, 1988:1-20). This paper investigates aspects of Igbo culture, as presented in Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God*. It also illustrates aspects of the "Africanization of English" (Osofisan, 1982) that characterize Achebe's style.

The Burden of African Literature

The burden of African literature, as championed by Achebe, is thus not merely to entertain but to educate the world with emphasis on the latter. African literature has a profound cognitive value and dilettante is alien to African experience. As Ojaide (1992: 44) succinctly puts it, "there is, culturally speaking, no art for art's sake in Africa. Every literary work has a social mission." Achebe's artistic mission is thus impassioned by the desire "to help Africans regain belief in itself and put away the complex of the years of oppression and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the sense of that word" (Achebe, 1988:44). This foremost duty of educating Africans and re-education process involves the use of literature to teach African history and linguistic behaviour. Perhaps, no book of Achebe accomplishes this better than his second novel, *Arrow of God*.

In carrying out this mission, language is a powerful tool. The dilemma facing the African writer, from Nigeria to Tanzania, is getting his message across to a wide audience without losing the cultural traits of African linguistic patterns (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1997:81). Achebe, "the father of modern African literature" (The Booker Prize Foundation, 2007), like other African writers, has created a sort of African English: an English that mostly uses the English words whose usages have been invested with values, concepts and nuances of everyday African linguistic patterns. The language is like the brew of African ideas and expressions brewed in the new bottle of English (Achebe, 1973). This is the price, Achebe contends, a world language writer must pay!

African literature thus seeks to project the challenges facing Africa from the colonial past, to the colonial period, right to the present post-colonial age. It depicts the lives of the traditional Africans, their practices, ethos and mores, and the conflicts that colonialism engendered in the system and discusses

the crises underpinning the modern states of Africa. The essence of this effort by the literary artists is the portrayal of Africans as peoples, like other peoples of the world, with their own dreams, values, customs and weaknesses. African written literature, which evolved through colonialism from African oral literature, is concerned with reviewing the past, assessing the present and projecting a better future for Africa. It educates, informs, entertains and documents Africans as they change with the changing world.

2. Thematic Concerns of *Arrow of God*

After a successful outing with his seminal and well-acclaimed *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, (translated into 60 languages with 15 million copies sold) Chinua Achebe makes a follow-up to his clash of cultures thematic preoccupation advanced in his previous work with *Arrow of God* (1964), a novel well-applauded by critics (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1997:79). The Igboland of Nigeria has now capitulated to the superior military firepower of the British colonial masters whose administration is gaining strength, like their religion, Christianity. Ezeulu, the protagonist and Chief Priest of Ulu, is pragmatic enough to send his son Oduche to be his "eye and ear among those people" (p.221) of the white man's religion. The conflict engendered by that decision and his own friendly disposition to the white man, based on his truthfulness, eventually lead to the disruption of tradition first in the sacrilegious attempt on the sacred python's life by his son, Oduche, and then the backlash of attaining the admiration of Captain Winterbottom (who Nwaka of Umuonneora, the articulate orator, pejoratively refers to as "a man of white body" whose leprous hands Ezeulu metaphorically shook (p.114)). A favourable disposition of crowning the Chief Priest of Ulu a Warant Chief turns unfortunate along the chain of communication. Ezeulu is detained for two months in Okperi during which he cannot eat the ritual yams, the end of which signals the beginning of harvest. He is pitched against his angry and hungry people because he maintains that harvest cannot be made until he finishes eating the yams he missed while in Okperi.

The ensuing conflict gives way to a mass exodus to Christianity which offers a way out by asking people to harvest their crops, shun Ulu and his priest and bring offering to the Church. The fall of Ezeulu is a symbolic fall of traditional culture before the new European civilization. And thus, Africans cannot withstand colonialism while traditional religion loses to Christianity which becomes more strengthened at the end of the novel. *Arrow of God* is an explicit repudiation of the colonial defilement of African values and tradition, the nature of the British in appreciating African values and the collapse of traditionalism before the triumphant jackboots of modernity typified by Western cultural and religious practices. The dramatic resolution of the plot of *Arrow of God* has won the author the admiration of John Updike, a notable American.

is cited by Ozenwa-Ohaeto (1997:105) to have praised Achebe's ending "an ending few Western novelists would have contrived". From the dominant theme of the clash of cultures and the eventual conversion to Christianity, Achebe passes across minor themes. Ezeulu largely symbolizes truth (he witnessed against his own people). Unlike Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, he has a complete control over his anger - "my friend, don't make me laugh" (p.11). He has the acute ability to suppress his anger. Whatever his fault is, Ezeulu is a symbol of admirable youthfulness, impulsiveness and his counsel to him is instructive, however:

"It is not worthy 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 the ruins where a brave man used to live. The man who has submitted to anything will soon submit to the burial mat (p.11).

Ezeulu is a symbol of good friendship - a friend in need and a friend that does not shy away from calling a spade a spade, a friend that stands by Ezeulu through thick and thin.

A thematic appraisal of *Arrow of God*, (which lies outside the scope of this study) would reveal diverse lessons that the author intends to convey. Even Ezeulu's antagonist, the rumbustious, compulsive and arrogant Nwaka, represents the power of oratory in making things work "for malicious ends" (Egejuru, 2001: 396). Characters like the fearless corporal Matthew Nweke typify betrayal; Oduche, of his own people, Nweke, of African traditions. That our last encounter with Ezeulu leaves his father "at the brink of tears" (p.221) after the latter's betrayal is suggestive of the underlining moral. And Matthew Nweke's psychological trauma of his sick child, is denied the use of his own power from Ezeulu's household, projecting the desirability of the consequences of people's actions and inactions.

Themes of Igbo Culture in *Arrow of God*

Arrow of God offers a complex exploration of the dynamics of the socio-cultural life of the Igbo people of the most populous country in Africa, Nigeria. All aspects of the people's culture are portrayed with accuracy. For the purpose of this study, twelve aspects of Ibo culture are examined while others are mentioned. These are: family structure, greetings, virginity (chastity), marriage, occupation, food, festivals, name, communications, etc.

Time. The notion of time is not foreign to African experience. Time markers are the sun and the moon, for days and months respectively. Twelve moons make a year and four market days make a week. Cock-crow (p.18) signals the beginning of day and nightfall comes by "sunset" (p.16). Cosmic bodies (the sun and the moon) and birds help in determining time. Achebe succeeds in underscoring the fact that Africans had their means of tracking time before the invention of clocks and the contact with the Europeans.

Family Structure. The family structure in traditional Africa is polygamous. Ezeulu has two living wives, the third having died. Family members live together in a compound where each woman has her own hut. The older male children get their own huts (*obi*) built when they are ripe for marriage. There is a division of labour in the family set-up determined by gender differences. Women cook and fetch water. Men work on the farms and build huts. Wives take turns at cooking for their husband (p.13) as he shares his wives' beds in turns. The first son moves into the father's *obi* when the latter dies. The father maintains a firm grip on the household and enforces discipline by preventing and settling disputes. Jealousy between wives is a possibility, not a rule.

Greetings. In Igbo culture, greetings take place by invoking the name of the person. Ezeulu's sons, Nwafo and Edego, salute him by saying "Ezeulu!" Greeting a group of people is done by calling the group name: "Umuaro," the response to which is "Hem!" (pp.15, 16, etc.) Men shake hands and refusing to take an extended hand is a face threatening act, a sign of hostility, like the refusal of Akukalia to shake the hand of Ebò (p. 22).

Virginity. Virginity, the distinctive mark of chastity, is treasured among ladies and a newly-wedded wife that is not "found at home" (p.118) is an eternal disgrace to herself and family. Akuata's mother is apprehensive about her and is nervous about the distant possibility of her daughter not being *found at home* by her husband, Obika. No woman would want the message that the husband of Ogbanje Omenyi sent to his mother-in-law: a request "for a machete to cut the bush on either side of the highway which she carried between her huts" (p.123), a rebuke occasioned by his disappointment in finding his new wife already deflowered. The erosion of this cultural heritage through modernization and the rejection of traditional values have largely accounted for the explosion of HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa.

Marriage. Marriage is a sacred institution in Africa and in Igboland in particular. For this reason that divorce is a kind of taboo, and if there is one, all efforts are made to re-unite the couple. Marriage has special rites and rituals that accompany it so that the wife's new life is secured and insured. A new bride is

...by family and friends to her husband's house with a lot of gifts, including utensils, cloths and food items (pp.118-120). It is not a trivial thing in the hands of the couple alone.

There is the concept of God in African belief and atheism is alien to African philosophy. Communal life revolves around religious rituals. The Union of Umuaro is made possible by the power of Ulu, to the Priest, Ezeulu, offers prayers: "...let our wives bear male children. Priests enjoy social respect as the custodians of the tradition. As a personal god, that an individual must not challenge, as the gods and Animals are dedicated to gods, and here the sacred symbol is *ikemili* is a religious symbol that no one should kill. There is the strength of one's right arm, representing an individual's daily sacrifice (p.37). As *ikenga* is only broken when one is committing murder. The abominable *ikenga* leads to the death of Akukalia and the resultant and Okperi.

Igbo people are hospitable to their guests. Basic items of food are pieces of kolanut (p.20), white clay and palm wine. White clay is used to draw lines of personal emblem in lines drawn with white chalk. Onwuzoligbo as a vertical lines below which lies a horizontal line (p.62); as a guest of Ezeulu, while there are four upright lines (p.95) as a guest of Ezeulu, while there are five lines, three upright lines and a horizontal line at the base of hostility between Umuachala (Ezeulu's village) and Ezeulu's main adversary, Nwaka, John Nwodika of Ezeulu receive Ezeulu well at Okperi. A guest also paints his horn (for drinking palm wine) as a guest brings along his horn (for drinking palm wine) as a goatskin bag.

Occupations of Africans or Igbo people are farming, trading and trading at the market. Carpentry is a new occupation with colonial administration and Moses Nwachukwu, a convert in Umuaro" (p.47) has the privilege of being one. Traditional medical practice, done through the knowledge of sacrificial animals.

The people is *fufu*, which is often taken with bitter-leaf. The cuisine include yam pottage, meat or "boiled legs of yam" and roasted yam and cocoyam, taken with palm oil.

(pp.9;13;116-117;159). These can be contra-distinguished from the colonial food: "fresh fruit, salad made from pawpaw, banana and oranges" (p.108).

Festival. Religion, rituals and festivals play complementary roles in most parts of the world and Igboland is not an exception. The major festivals in *Arrow of God* are Pumpkin Leaves Feast and New Yam Festival. They represent what Easter and Christmas symbolize to Christians. Both of these festivals of the Igbo are given elaborate detail. Apart from these major two, most of the six villages that make up Umuaro have their local festivals. As Achebe puts it, "Umuagu celebrated their *Mgba Agbogho* or the Wrestling of the Maidens; Umunneora observed their annual feast in honour of Idemili, Owner of the python". While the six villages celebrated *Oso Nwanadi* to placate resentful spirits of the fallen war heroes, Umuachala celebrated its own minor *Akwu Nro*, "a memorial offering by widows to the departed husbands" (p.194).

Name. Naming is highly significant in Africa. The European/Shakespearean nominal simplification "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet." (*Romeo and Juliet* II, ii, 1-2) is not valid in the African context. The Yoruba, for instance, say "We consider the home situation first before we name a child" and "names influence personality". The Igbo also manifest this belief and Achebe makes use of the names and epithets in driving home his themes. *Dévourer like Leopard* is the epithet of Obika's age-group, Otakagu, the younger age-group being deprecatingly referred to as *Ommawa* (p.77). Captain Winterbottom is code-named *Destroyer of Guns* and the day of Dr. Savage's surgical operations is the *Day of Cutting Open of the Bowels*. A highly competent native doctor or *dibia* is known as *The Bow that Shoots at the Sky* (p.157). Achebe also diminishes foreign names: rather than call John his name, he always refers to him as Nwodika's son, his first name reduced to a sort of anathema (pp.165; 167). The novelist successfully deprives him of identity as a way of repudiating his English/Christian name. That Achebe does this on purpose is evidenced by his own rejection of his Christian name Albert, which he dropped as a University undergraduate (Achebe, 1988: 33). And, in a typical tit-for-tat fashion, as Africans were said to be savages, a colonial medical doctor's name is Dr. Savage.

Communication. Communal messages are passed across by beating *ogene* (as *Ezeulu* does to announce the new moon, for instance (p.2)). There are announcers who assist the community in sending such signals to all and sundry while beating the drum (p.65). In summoning the elders for a meeting (p.141) or during festivals where there are audience, *ikolo* is beaten as a form of traditional ritual as well as paying tributes to dignitaries (pp.70-71). *Ogene* is also beaten at Ulu's name during major festivals.

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience.

Another writer that articulated the thrust of English usage by African writers is Gabriel Okpara, a contemporary of Achebe in writing and culture. In 1963 paper aptly entitled "African Speech...English Words," he, like Achebe, expressed the psychological context behind his use of language. According to him (cited in Hunjo, 2002:63),

As a writer who believes in the utilization of African ideas, African philosophy and African folklore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion that the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as his medium of expression. I have endeavored in my words to keep as close as possible to the vernacular expression.

The submissions above underline almost every aspect of Achebe's creative enterprise. He knows that in Africa, English is no more than a vehicle for African cultures as well as of English. He agrees with Grieve (1964:13) that English is to be an effective mode of communication in Africa, it is essential to adapt itself so as to be able to express concepts that do not exist in the English culture. This scenario has been variously referred to as a process of 'indigenization', 'domestication' and 'decolonization' of English, in which at practical level, Achebe is a fore-runner.

With this background, he maintains African identity in his writing and disagrees with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, another eminent African writer, on the writer's eventual renunciation of English as a literary vehicle and his campaign for the use of African languages in African literature. Achebe justifiably believes that this self-censorship is not necessary, that what is needed is to contextualize and Africanize the use of English words. He considers it further unnecessary for an African to speak like a European. For, when he was asked if an African could ever learn to use English as an English man, his response was "I should say, no. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to do so" (Achebe, 1975:101).

Achebe maintains that a positive consequence of colonialism, despite its ills, is providing people of diverse linguistic backgrounds "a language with which to talk to one another" and as his purpose is to communicate with readers across Nigeria, he uses "the one central language enjoying nationwide currency" (Achebe, 1975: 77-78) which is also accessible to all parts of the world. That Ngugi had to switch back to English about seven years ago (Jeyifo, 1986:1) which he renounced in 1986 with his *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, provides further evidence to the profundity of Achebe's forthright insightfulness in terms of language use.

Thus, in the *Arrow of God* like most of his other works, Achebe's language dazzles with a peculiar vitality that is especially nourishing to the African or Africanized audience who are able to "connect" easily with him. Such distinctive piquancy and freshness, such a peculiar taste and convincingness, underpin the semantic implications of the following expressions and the processes of nativization or variation behind them. The lexico-semantic features engendering the expressions mark the features that scholars like Okpikpa (1989), Bamiro (1994) and Alabi (2000) identify as transfer (of meaning, culture, context and Nigerian Pidgin features), analogy, semantic shift or extension, coinages or neologisms, generalization, narrowing, translation equivalents, semantic duplication and redundancy as well as sheer rhetoric and imagery. The selected expressions are almost all self-explanatory to an African

- "May your face meeting mine bring good fortune" (p.2)
- "perhaps I spoke with water in my mouth" (p.5)
- "We have not come with wisdom but with foolishness because a man does not go to his in-law with wisdom" (p.12)
- "I will make you eat shit" (p.23)
- "Afo passed, Nkwo passed, Eke passed, Oye passed...I listened; but my head did not ache, my belly did not ache..." (p.40)
- "He is well...But at the same time he is not" (p.53)
- "I would have given you something to remind you always of the day you put your head into the mouth of a leopard" (p.53)
- "If it pains you, come and jump on my back, ant-hill nose" (p.66)
- "When they heard their betters talking about palm wine in future they would not open their mouth so wide" (p.79)
- "of palm wine a good drinker could take without losing knowledge of himself" (p.78)
- "there was as little to choose between them as between rotten palm nuts and a broken mortar" (p.80)

"...he must have got out of bed from the left side" (p.82)
 "...everybody must work hard and stop all this shit-eating" (p.83)
 "...not assembled to join him in chewing the seed of foolishness..." (p.85)
 "The white man is like hot soup and we must take him slowly from the edges of the bowl" (p.85)
 "You have the yam and you have the knife" (p.96)
 "This type of heat is not empty-handed" (p.96)
 "This hen will follow me home" (p.120)
 "But let me see you come back from the stream with yesterday's body and we shall see whose madness is greater..." (p.123)
 "...gave her thunder on the face" (p.127)
 "Forgive me. I take my hands off" (p.136)
 "My friend, don't make me laugh" (p.134)
 "I am the tortoise who was trapped in a pit of excrement for two whole markets; but when helpers came to haul him out on the eighth day he cried! Quick, quick: I cannot stand the stench." (p.181)
 "They said it was the fighting posture of a boar when a leopard was about: it dug a shallow hole in the earth, sat with his testicles hidden away in it and waited with standing bristles on its head of iron." (p.197)
 "The fly that struts around a mound of excrement wastes his time" (p.226)

Conclusion

African literature emerged out of a need to fill a vacuum: the gap of voicelessness. The initial void allowed for the popularity of obvious literary works about Africa, whose inhabitants were described as savages, people without civilization and culture. This distortion of reality served as a stimulus to the emergence of African writers producing African literature which attempts to educate and enlighten the world about Africans. A leading figure in this cultural consciousness and campaign is Chinua Achebe. *Arrow of God* is such an embodiment of the African cultural tradition which reveals every aspect of Igbo life, the personal, the social and the communal. In projecting a true image of Africa, Achebe lays bare the facts: Africa is populated by civilized men and women who had flourishing religious, political, philosophical and economic systems. These systems were not perfect, like the systems of the West, but denying their existence is a travesty of reality. His mission thus is to showcase life and living in Africa and to

the consequences that the historical contact with Europeans has wrought on it. He relies in his mission on his keen insight and deep perception of African values, mores and ethos. He also relies on his mastery of English, a special quality of which he has evolved to achieve, according to Nadine Gordimer, "what his characters brilliantly defines as the writer's purpose; 'a new found manner' for the capture of life's complexity" (The Booker Prize Foundation, 1987).

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