

FROM CENTRE-STAGE TO THE WINGS: THE PROCESS OF CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT IN *ARROW OF GOD*

S.I. Akhjemokhan and R.A. Masagbor¹

Abstract

The essay examines culture and cultural adjustment in Arrow of God by Chinua Achebe. Using Edward Said's theory on culture as a foundation, it explores the elasticity of a fictional, precolonial West African society, Umuaro. The essay pictures culture as a large cell with core elements located at the centre, like a nucleus. The study then proceeds to apply this mental picture to the text, seeing the protagonist as analogous to a core element in his culture and hence as equivalent to the nucleus at the centre of the cell. The protagonist is a pivotal figure initially, and this idea is expressed symbolically in terms of the centralized position of the core element in the cultural cell. At the end of the day, however, he has become a social outcast, a status which again is expressed symbolically in terms of the movement of the core element away from the centre to the periphery. The essay concludes that the symbolic reproduction of culture re-inforces the literal one, and that Achebe recognizes equally the strengths and weaknesses of the community he is describing.

Introduction

In 1871, the anthropologist, Edward B. Tylor, defined culture lucidly and “in its widest ethnographic sense as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1). Elaborations, modifications and streamlining of his classic definition have been made over the decades by intellectuals both inside and outside the discipline of anthropology. For instance, Roland Posner (1989: 254), a writer of both literary and sociological essays, identifies three types of culture: social culture (institutions and rituals transmitted from one generation to another); material culture (artifacts and skills transmitted in like manner); and mental culture (mentifacts and conventions also transmitted from one generation to another). A more recent contribution to the dialogue

¹ S.I. Akhjemokhan and R.A. Masagbor both teach at the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, Nigeria.

comes from the erudite Palestinian literary scholar, Edward Said. Said (1983) underscores the intricate relationship between culture and the text, in particular, the literary text, an area where his studies are largely recognized as ground-breaking. He distinguishes two salient elements of culture which affirm the traditional viewpoints and at the same time are indicative of his innovations in the field of cultural criticism:

In the first place [...] culture is used to designate not merely something to which one belongs, but something that one possesses and, along with that proprietary process, culture also designates a boundary by which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture come into forceful play [...] But, in the second place, there is a more interesting dimension to this idea of culture [...] by virtue of its elevated or superior position to authorize, to dominate, to legitimate, demote, interdict, and validate: in short, the power of culture to be an agent of, and perhaps the main agency for, powerful differentiation within its domain and beyond it too. (8-9)

It is evident that Edward Said, like his predecessor and namesake, Edward Tylor, views culture as a complete entity with discernible boundaries and a specific domain. There are concepts “intrinsic” to the culture, which fall within the boundaries, and there are concepts “extrinsic” to it. In addition, Said evidently construes culture as a differentiating force with a mandate to promote any given number of concepts – the beliefs, art, morals, laws, and so on outlined earlier by Tylor – or alternatively to downgrade them. Thus it is that culture can “authorize,” “legitimate” and “validate,” according to Said, or “dominate,” “demote” and “interdict”.

Said’s definition is appealing and provides a befitting theoretical framework for this paper because it articulates so clearly the most fundamental principles of culture. His definition embodies a foundational element of Tylor’s definition, which is the idea of culture as a complex whole comprising multiple parts, and it goes beyond this to imply a continual sifting and sorting of the parts within the whole. Bearing this in mind, one can posit that the boundaries of culture shift with time and

space, and that capabilities and habits that are central to a culture in one era can become peripheral in another or even go into extinction. The nature of culture is such that this process of cultural phenomena shifting from core position to boundary – and thence perhaps into extinction – is ceaseless. We look at this process of shifting cultural phenomena in terms of cultural adjustment. Seen from this perspective, cultural adjustment is the relocation of the parts within the complex whole, whereby the “old” habits and capabilities recede to the borderlines of communal activity and new ones move to a core position. This view presupposes the demotion of the former elements and the legitimization of the latter, to use Said’s terminology. Therefore, adjustment may incorporate the notion of centralization, as certain phenomena are brought to the limelight; the notion of marginalization, as certain phenomena are relegated; and even the notion of demise, should the relegated phenomena ultimately die out entirely.

It is interesting to see how this theme is treated in a familiar African novel: *Arrow of God (AG)* by Chinua Achebe. *Arrow of God* depicts a culture in the process of adjustment, and the continual positioning and re-positioning of the protagonist, Ezeulu, figuratively reproduces the demotion of a core cultural element when the cultural whole is undergoing transition. It is a drama which takes the leading performer from centre-stage to the wings, and the manner and speed of his transference is enlightening when studied from the angle of culture as an agent of differentiation.

Cultural adjustment is a key topic in reviews on Achebe. As the literary analyst, Chidi Okonkwo (1996: 105) avers: “A whole generation of Achebe critics has concentrated on the cultural-conflict aspect of Achebe’s plots and themes in his novel”. Okonkwo (1996: 105-106) cites Emmanuel Ngara and Ossie Enekwe as exemplifying a considerable body of critics who agree that Achebe’s cultural-nationalistic novels hover around “cultural disintegration [...] ignor[ing] the fact that the same cultures which are supposed to have ‘disintegrated’ are also portrayed as triumphant”. Okonkwo is not persuaded that the disintegration of Igbo culture is Achebe’s preoccupation, and he questions the tendency of reviewers to parallel the decease of the protagonists with the end of their ways of life. Towards the close of his paper he remarks:

The New Yam Feast crisis ends in a mass conversion of Umuaro to Christianity. Achebe suggests that this is a result of Ulu and Ezeulu's having mutually ruined themselves [... However] though Ulu and his priest are ruined, Umuaro is not. Critics who interpret the denouement to mean disintegration of Umuaro miss the fact that despite the stampede which characterizes the people's embracing of Christianity, *the clan actually emerges whole from the ordeal, though significantly changed. In other words, Umuaro has triumphantly gone through its rites of passage and been reborn.* (119, emphasis added)

Okonkwo's observation that the clan "emerges whole" after having gone through its rites of passage is noteworthy. Culture as qualified by both Tylor and Said – that is, in terms of a complex body comprising a variety of elements – would certainly bear this out. Indeed, what Okonkwo perceives as change through rites of passage is approximate to the shifting, or re-ranking, of the parts within the whole. Nevertheless, Okonkwo does not press the matter. He proceeds with scholarliness to highlight Achebe's use of time and number as social documents, and to evaluate Ezeulu's task as "the reckoner of time and season in his community" (108). We examine the mechanism of change slightly more thoroughly than Okonkwo does because we believe it illuminates determinate aspects of the culture depicted. Furthermore, we detect a tenuous bridge between the erstwhile parallel convictions on Achebe's portrayal of cultural adjustment; i.e., the conviction that the clan disintegrates as against the conviction that it triumphs. Assuming culture is a communal cell, it is feasible for the disintegration to take place at its borderlines even while the clan remains whole.

Before winding up this section, reference should be made to one of our earlier papers on Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Arrow of God* (Masagbor and Akhjemokhan 2007). We compared iconicity in the two texts, applying the three types of icon – viz. the image, the diagram, and the metaphor – to the mental reconstructions of the reader and the writer. Being a linguistic appraisal based on the theory of the semiotician, C.S. Peirce, the paper quite naturally did not do justice to the wealth of

literary symbolism in either of the novels. The present study hopes to redress this.

In summary, much has been written on *Arrow of God* but nothing by way of a literary appraisal of a culture invalidating one of its own intrinsic concepts. Ezeulu is analogous to a core element within his culture, and his centralization and later marginalization reflect the tendency of culture towards grading its elements as well as the positive and negative sides of Umuaro's cultural fluidity. A closer look at the novel will make the analogy clearer and aid an objective reading of the author's portrayal of cultural adjustment.

Centralization

Commenting on Ezeulu, Okonkwo (1996: 108) posits that Achebe "conceives this character partly in the light of anthropological theories which portray priests as the intellectuals of tribal society". Ezeulu may consequently be deemed emblematic of the intellectual limb of his society. He may equally be deemed emblematic of something else or something weightier, because it is manifest that his larger-than-life quality, which many literary analysts have attested to, makes him seem more of an institution than an individual at the start of events in *Arrow of God*. As the celebrated priest of Ulu, the major deity of the six clans that constitute Umuaro, he is a pivotal figure. He influences the greatest and the least of the people's decisions: regulating their monthly calendar, sitting in the elders' meetings and acting as a mediator between them and their god. Ezeulu is an interesting fusion of the clan's political, economic and spiritual concerns – perhaps not representative of its entire culture, but definitely representative of a central part of it. A graphic illustration of his initial place at the heart of the community occurs early in the narrative during the Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves. During the feast, he officiates at the centre of the market place ringed around by the inhabitants of all the six villages. The men form the outermost ring, the women the inner ring; the six messengers circulate within the arena proper and he presides at the nucleus. He is painted half white and half black as a token of his affinity with the spiritual and physical life of Umuaro, respectively. The paint underscores his peculiarity and simultaneously marks him as a cohesive

agent on two levels; first, on the vertical level, between earth and heaven, and second, on the horizontal level, bonding neighbour to neighbour in a vivid expression of communal solidarity. Hence he functions as a magnet, coordinating a ceremony which induces the scrutiny of the gods above and pulls the community together below. In the forthcoming scene taken from the feast, the men station themselves in the background to give moral support, and the women actively participate in an exercise which Ezeulu marshals with authority:

By now Ezeulu was in the centre of the market place. He struck the metal staff into the earth and left it quivering while he danced a few more steps to the *Ikolo* which had not paused for breath since the priest emerged [...] Then he pulled the staff out of the ground and with it in his left hand and the *Mother of Ofo* in his right he jumped forward, and began to run round the market place [...]

The six messengers followed closely behind the priest and at intervals, one of them bent down quickly and picked up at random one bunch of leaves and continued running [...]

As if someone had given them a sign, all the women of Umunneora broke out from the circle and began to run round the market place, stamping their feet heavily [...] Then the women of Umuagu [...] no one ran out of turn. (AG 72-73)

Literally and figuratively, everything revolves around Ezeulu. He plainly embodies something momentous in his community. We take him as symbolic of a core phenomenon in his people's culture, which is also undoubtedly a vibrant, or living, phenomenon. The vibrancy of the phenomenon is indisputable because despite the chief priest's years, the Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and the other ordinances that he conducts cannot be misconstrued as defunct cultural habits. The Feast is the ultimate prayer of confession and supplication offered collectively by his people, and similarly the New Yam Festival, which occurs later in the text, is an elaborate fête of thanksgiving that commands the presence of "every grown man in Umuaro" (202). The manner in which the tribe turns

out *en masse* for these festivities is an index of the degree of faith attached to them, and validates the chief priest's office as integral to fervent and fruitful cultural habits.

When we place Ezeulu on the symbolic drawing board, viewing culture as a single compartment with designated boundaries, we see him as a radial point in a communal organism. The picture is that of a large cell with a bright living element at mid-section. Such conjecturing might appear to be nothing but mental sketching of the narrative material; however, it re-iterates unmistakably the singularity of the culture being described and the author's attitude to this culture. For example, Ezeulu's centralised position in the diagram works artistically to proclaim Achebe's approval of Umuaro. The core position of a living phenomenon is indicative of a healthy and fluid society in which the "heart" is alive, thereby guaranteeing life and movement throughout the whole. Under these circumstances, energy is the defining trait of the entirety, and there is little possibility of disintegrating phenomena being left to contaminate it. Rather, anything threatening to become debris will be automatically flushed out of the bloodstream – a principle which is played out with tragic effect in the very pages of the text. In substance, the vital force at the bosom of the organism, and the flux and flow which naturally emanate from the vitality, are explicit signs of a dynamic and liquid culture. The symbolism reinforces Achebe's pre-eminent motif of a flourishing flexible pre-colonial society.

Ezeulu's stature is undeniably considerable, but significantly, it is subject to a higher authority. Accordingly, even while he looms like a Colossus at the centre of his culture, the differentiation process continues. The process is impelled partly by forces outside his control, such as the coming of the Europeans and the intrusive, corroding presence of the white District Officer, Captain Winterbottom. But in another sense Ezeulu's own actions precipitate the re-ranking mechanism, a prime illustration being his testimony against his clan during the land dispute with Okperi which makes him an object of mistrust. The important point is that culture, as sovereign administrator within its domain, does not require the chief priest's knowledge or consent to operate, and while it sanctions his centrality in one season it debars it in another.

Marginalization

Cultural adjustment can occur with speed in a liquid society. Aside from all that has been said about Umuaro thus far, its fluidity infers absorption, which is the signature of more than one of Achebe's traditional societies. A case in point is Umuofia in his acclaimed novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Umuofia's capacity to absorb whatever comes its way is lauded in a series of proverbs: "Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching" (*Things Fall Apart* 16); "[t]he clan was like a lizard, if it lost its tail it soon grew another" (121); and so on. As the critic, Umelo Ojinmah (1991: 20) rightly asserts: "The society's ability to adapt to any situation [...] is a survival mechanism". As it is in Umuofia, so it is in Umuaro, and nobody would quarrel about a people's desire to survive. A problem surfaces, however, because the dividing line between being adaptable and being fickle is often precariously slim, and the clan can be judged in its dealings with Ezeulu. Umuaro appears to subordinate its paramount spiritual watchman and intercessor with alarming ease – he translates from "a kind of priest-king in Umuaro" (AG 38) to a condition reminiscent of paltriness "almost overnight" (211). Admittedly, the community escapes whole after his send-off, but not without a dent on its dependability. Be that as it may, his shift demonstrates cogently the effectiveness of his society's demotion machinery.

Ezeulu's marginalization is swift. He maintains a relatively central position until Obika's death a few days before the New Yam harvest, and then experiences a full and abrupt eclipse. We use the qualifier "relatively" because the destabilizing forces earlier mentioned, occasioned by colonial interference and Ezeulu's individualism, have been imperceptibly weakening his footing from the start. This point notwithstanding, almost throughout the narrative, his centralized position can be envisaged as a bold dot amidst an array of rings. The protagonist consistently remains under the spotlight as a focal point, a magnet, and an arresting performer. The other characters – the inhabitants of Umuaro, Okperi, and Government-Hill – range themselves around him, figuratively speaking, watching his every move. It is intriguing to see how the opening picture of Ezeulu, the painted priest at the Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves with the

rings of men and women surrounding him, is sustained metaphorically almost to the close of the text. He continues to function as the colourful individual in the thick of events, keeping the community electrified with his unorthodox behaviour and causing all eyes to be ever fixed on his person.

One way or the other he is regularly a point of reference. As a positive point of reference he is the chief priest of the chief deity and the sole voice that challenges the idea of a mission to Okperi, a venture which ends in disaster as he predicts. Added to this is his impressive compound, his outstanding wealth, which is evident in the marriage he hosts, and the exceptional good looks of his family. On the other hand, as a negative reference point his younger son, Oduche, does the unthinkable when he locks up the sacred python in a box, and his favourite son, Obika, is whipped for going late to build the white man's road. Half-way through the text Ezeulu travels to Government Hill, Okperi, but the change in location does not detract from his centralized position. On the contrary, it accentuates it, because Government Hill is the headquarters of British Administration in the province, and even from his prison cell his story is on all lips. The health of Captain Winterbottom, for instance – which Ezeulu is reportedly monitoring by magical devices – is only of interest to the Africans as far as it relates to Ezeulu, and his haughty rejection of a chieftaincy appointment sends currents through his audience that remind them that he is eternally Ezeulu, the magnet. In fact, the ripples of excitement he generates from his confinement fan out through Okperi and Umuaro in a fashion that replicates the prevailing pattern of a dot in the middle of dilating spheres; it is the regular bull's-eye picture mirrored in water.

On Ezeulu's return to Umuaro every eye remains glued to him, albeit in hostility when he refuses to call the New Yam festival. Invariably, his son dies and the impact is like a minor earthquake, beginning in his compound and spreading abroad: "Obika's death shook Umuaro to the roots" (220). The conclusion to be drawn from these episodes is that any physical movement Ezeulu makes is superficial to his basic symbolic centrality. His stature in the community is comparatively undiminished until the moment that everything suddenly caves in. The earthquake is the

last of the ripples he creates. Obika departs and “a few days after” (230) his father is on the fringes of communal activity.

Achebe’s choice of language in describing the transition is thought-provoking – “almost overnight”, “a few day’s after”. They raise vague misgivings in the reader’s mind about a society which can so smoothly switch from one cultural habit to another. For the people troop to the Christian harvest, bypassing a convention (the New Yam Festival) which, only the previous year, had attracted every grown man in Umuaro (202). And for the crowd that decamps there is no going back. “*Thereafter* any yam harvested in [its] fields was harvested in the name of the son” (230, emphasis added). This is the closing sentence of the novel, delivered with a tone of finality. The reader ponders over the fluid society of Umuaro and concedes, with some regret, that anything liquid readily gives way under pressure.

To return to the concept of a cultural whole and cultural parts, the preceding outline betokens a sweeping adjustment manoeuvre in which a core phenomenon is radically taken to the sidelines, and maybe thence into extinction, as was postulated in our earlier comments on culture. At the point at which Ezeulu becomes an outcast, the demotion process can be said to have resulted in interdiction, perhaps the severest measure of culture as a discriminating force. The deftness of the process re-iterates the fact that Umuaro is a liquid culture and that certain behaviours accompany the liquidity. For example, it would be unreasonable to ask a liquid entity to provide a foothold, or an elastic entity to keep its shape when stretched. Had Ezeulu reflected on this, and on the natural make-up of his society, he would have guessed that when faced with a life-and-death dilemma of the sort Umuaro faces, the clan would not stand behind him for long. It is a reality which Achebe takes in his stride. He describes the chief priest’s exit with a practicality that communicates his knowledge that such casualties, though disturbing, are part and parcel of that particular civilization.

Conclusion

The tale of Ezeulu is that of a proud hero's transference from centre-stage to the wings. We have taken him to be analogous with a core element in his culture, and have tried to illustrate that his initial centralization and later dislodgment reflect a grading tendency that is inherent in culture. Initially, Ezeulu is the figure at the centre of affairs in Umuaro. He is visualized as an immense decimal point where communal forces converge; a thriving element deep-seated in a liquid organization that Achebe patently sanctions. Then centralization gives way to decentralization, italicizing the fluidity of the clan's way of life. On account of Umuaro's liquidity the tide of its events is rapid, which means that adjustment is commensurately fast, even to a fault. In consequence, Ezeulu's deportation is effected with minimum delay and without sentiment, presenting itself as a dot streaking to the perimeter of the cultural graph. The dot has been jeopardized by numerous pressures for some time, and when the moment finally arrives it undergoes a full-drive eviction to the boundary. But this is not to presume that Ezeulu means nothing to his people. It merely confirms the thesis that prompted our symbolic translation; namely, that culture is in truth a powerful agent of differentiation.

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