



CONFUSED LEADERSHIP AND ABUSE OF POWER IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD*

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ABSTRACT



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Two key terms are used in this paper-power and leadership. Are they different? Or two sides of the same coin? Does power come with leadership or leadership leads to power? To me, both the terms are different as power is that which forces people to do something against their wil as we have examples of how power was misused by Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussain, etc. But if we talk of leadership which comes up with many qualities like thinking of good for all and going beyond personalized likes and dislikes. We have ample of examples in history who were great leaders like Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, etc. Few people are born with leadership qualities and few learn it with passage of time and through their life experiences and experiences of their associates. In *Arrow of God*, Achebe explores the idea of power and leadership in Umuaro village how the whole village suffers due to poor leadership and abuse of power.

Keywords: Africa, power, leadership, postcolonial, complexity, culture, ideology, Nigeria, authority, Christianity.

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Arrow of God is one of the awesome reads written and published in 1964 by Chinua Achebe. This novel is the second in the trilogy, others are *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. The novel depicts Ibo culture of Umuaro village in its minuteness. It also depicts how a new culture (Western) defeats an ancient culture (Ibo). The novel's protagonist, Ezeulu is the Chief Priest who is honoured to declare the new year of Yams which calls for harvesting. At the advent of new moon, he eats one of the twelve sacred yams and declares the onset of harvesting

new crops. He is very influential in six villages, Umuachala, Umuchala, Umunneora, Umuagu, Umueziani and Umuogwugwu.

"The six villages then took the name of Umuaro, and the priest of Ulu became their Chief Priest." (Arrow of God 15)

Because of the unity of six villages, no enemy attacked Umuaro. After choosing Ezeulu as the Chief Priest of God Ulu, Umuaro was safe from the attacks of enemies. Ezeulu brings a symbol of peace to Umuaro. He also does not wish to wage a



war for a piece of land against Okperi. He clearly mentions to his clansmen: "If you choose to fight a man for a piece of farmland that belongs to him I shall have no hand in it." (Arrow of God 16)

Although this infuriated few clansmen like Nwaka who tried to tarnish the image of Ezeulu amongst his own people and provoked them against him and he also destroyed the effect of Ezeulu's speech by showing his passion and need for war. He said:

But let us not tell ourselves or our children that we did it because the land belonged to other people. Let us rather tell them that their fathers did not choose to fight. (AOG 17)

But dignity, honour and prestige of Ezeulu saved him leaving rumours behind. Few considered it his weakness, few considered it his maturity. Even after this event, all six villages got united and celebrated the Festival of Pumpkin Leaves. They forgot everything bitter which happened in recent past. A beautiful scenery of Ibo culture is drawn by Achebe which shows his love and pride for minuteness and intricacies of his culture. People worshipped for safety, security, prosperity of their households. This was the time when Akuke's in-laws wanted to take her back home but Ezeulu put the condition that she should not be beaten in future. Another festival celebrated by them was the New Yam Festival which marked the end of the old year and the beginning of the new year and in gratitude every man in Umuaro offered a good-sized yam to the shrine of the Ulu who saved them from the ravages of Abam. This was the time of festivals when unity between individuals, community and even gods was revalidated.

Umuaro was filled with happiness, but Ezeulu was aware of the fact that he was losing his authority and power over his people. He was not ready to accept the adverse effects of his growing old age. He could not distinguish the lines between himself as a priest and Ulu as a God. Though he knew that he was just an arrow in the bow of God, he craved for power and authority which was shaking because of the new religion, Christianity as well as deviation in his own cultural past. The conflict was

not only lying outside rather it was going in the mind of Ezeulu.

Oduche, Ezeulu's son had already suffocated the Python which was against his tradition and culture as serpents are considered sacred father in Nigerian culture; the belief stands against Christianity which says: "You address the python as Father. It is nothing but a snake, the snake that deceived our first mother, Eve. If you are afraid to kill it do not count yourself a Christian." (AOG 48) But Here we find a flaw in Ezeulu's character how he wanted to maintain his dignified stature of the Chief Priest by sending one of his sons to attend Christian school. He said: "I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there." (AOG 47) This action of his was also criticized by people of Umuaro as they started thinking that Ezeulu was friend of Britishers. The growing inner disputes gave a handsome opportunity to Britishers who stopped the war between Umuaro and Okperi and gathered all the guns in Umuaro and gave the disputed land to Okperi. This incident shook the existing authority of God of Ulu and His priest, Ezeulu. Power politics of Westerners did not end here. The beating of Obika gave another blow to Ezeulu. He could not believe the fact that just because of coming late for work, his son, Obika was whipped brutally and the news spread all around which led to shake the beliefs of clans men in their own past, heredity and God.

Throughout the novel, we are shown a man who has pride in himself and in his position as a priest who considers himself stronger even in his old age than the young people of his community but who is very slow to resolve any problem or issue and who is 'as proud as a lunatic' (AOG 178) for Nwaka.. When Britishers wanted to make him his priest, he contested saying:

"Tell the White man that Ezeulu will not be anybody's chief except Ulu." (AOG 176)

When he got the message of the white man that they wanted to meet him. He called for a meeting of all elders and titled men. He made it clarified to everyone that he had never been far from Umuaro as being the chief priest but nobody helped and supported him. His clansmen rather said that Britishers were his friends if they were calling him,



what was harm in that? Ezeulu also warned his people against the harmful strategies and policies of whitemen. He said: We have shown the white man the way to our house and given him a stool to sit on. If we now want him to go away again we must either wait until he is tired of his visit or we must drive him away. (AOG 133). But his people did not support him and he had to go to Okperi. But after his refusal of being English man's priest, he was imprisoned for thirty-two days at Okperi. There he contemplated on taking revenge on Umuaro people having not supported him to prevent his humiliation. This was the time he made the best use of it to find how in an enemy he saw a friend in Nwodika at a stranger's land who and his wife served him a lot while his own wife and children were thinking of the new moon. He shared his wisdom and grief with Nwodika:

"Do you know what my enemies at home call me?...They call me the friend of the white man." (AOG 180-181) The new moon had to wait for his return to Umuaro. This power of being a Chief Priest led him to teach his people a lesson and the new moon went without declaration of New Year. As long as he was in exile it was easy for him to think of Umuaro as one hostile entity. On his return, people welcomed him and asked him:

"It is now four days since the new moon appeared in the sky; it is already grown big. And yet you have not called us together to tell us the day of the New Yam Feast." (AOG 205) But Ezeulu replies: "I only call a new festival when there is only one yam left from the last. Today I have three yams and so I know that the time has not come." (AOG 209) Umuaro people requested him to suggest a way out otherwise their crops would be spoiled and they would die hungry. They also suggested him to eat two yams to save their crops. At this Ezeulu got stubborn saying that he could not eat 'death' by displeasing Ulu. This was how Ezeulu played the power role with his own people. If we compare him to Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, we find that Okonkwo was not flexible character. He was immensely rigid, impulsive which brought his downfall. He was sent to exile because of his over-impulsiveness and his people turned against him but her in this novel, Ezeulu's character is full of

complexities. Although he is also egoistic and full of pride but he is not impulsive rather he is rational. That's the reason he sends his one of the sons to learn the ways of Christianity knowing that in case White Man comes in power, he also has a place. His downfall comes when he manipulates with the belief of Umuaro people. Because of the rigidity of Ulu's religion, clansmen started turning towards Christianity as the new religion was not stopping them from harvesting only in return they had to offer some portion of their crops to new religion. They found new hope in new religion. This was the adverse effect of the inflexibility of native culture or open-mindedness of new religion that the people were duped.

"Almost overnight Ezeulu had become something of a public enemy in the eyes of all and, as was to be expected, his entire family shared in his guilt." (AOG 213)

Colonialism was a destructive assault on Africa and on the psyche and power of self-evaluation of Africans. Traumatic experience of colonialism and shattering of native culture compelled and stimulated Achebe to write *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. He recreates the whole past of African nativity and culture which come alive on the pages of both the novels. Both the novels respond to the traumatic experience faced through colonialism. Even Achebe likes *Arrow of God* more as he has confessed that *Arrow of God*...is the novel which I am most likely to be caught sitting down to read again." (Preface to Second Edition, *Arrow of God*. London: Heinemann, 1974.) He has based his novel on an actual episode recorded by Simon Nnolim in *The History of Umuchu*, in which the priest called Ezeagu rejected a chieftancy in 1913, was imprisoned and refused to roast the sacred yams for the months. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umuchu>)

The inability of the traditional leadership of Umuaro to resolve the crisis is partly because of conflict in religious values which we witness in the conflicting views and ideology of Ezeulu and Nwaka. Nwaka is ready to submit to Ulu but not to Ezeulu who is made to ask in his dream:



Why should we rely on him to tell us the season of the year? 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. (AOG 160-161)

In the context of whipping Obika during road-building exercise, road-builders were shocked but remained silent but not on the agenda of hostility between two villages. They let the white man rule over them. They took it very casually with a new incident-overrule of white man but with the old disputes and quarrels, they never remained silent. They were confused people of Umuaro who did not know how to deal with this new unprecedented incident.

The white man has a gun, a machet, a bow and carries fire in his mouth. He does not fight with one weapon alone." (AOG 86)

Ofokaa asks Ezeulu why five years earlier he stopped them to fight against White man and now suddenly he wants his people to go against them. He mentions:

"It was because we were confused. ..We are confused. We are like the puppy in the proverb which attempted to answer two calls at once and broke its jaw." (AOG 190)

Whiteman thought of befriending with Ezeulu thinking that he was also championing their mission of no war of weapons should take place between Umuaro and Okperi. That's why they called for him. Ezeulu's hunger for power and authority over his own people brought the downfall of Ulu and the Chief Priest. He could not differentiate religious authority from political authority. If he had gone with the people and not been stubborn, people of Umuaro would not have turned against him and Ulu. Their crops were saved from getting ruined by new religion which was not as stubborn as Ulu was, who was not saving them from hunger. After offering their crops to a new system, they started harvesting in the name of their son, not in the name of Ulu this time.

Ezeulu's character is quite contrast with Okonkwo's character from *Things Fall Apart*. He endeavours to console himself by imagining that he

was as good as any young man, or better because young men were no longer what they used to be. (1) This gesture is clearly indicative of his intention of perpetuating his religious authority and power over Umuaro. Throughout the novel, we see him haunted by fear that his power was in danger. He realized that he was merely a watchman.

His power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his. As long as the goat was alive it could be his; he would find it food and take care of it. But the day it was slaughtered he would know soon enough who the real owner was. (AOG 3)

His inability to maintain order in his own household signals his inability to unite six villages. When Obika was beaten by the white man at the road work, none of the villagers tried to save him rather when Ezeulu's wife and Obika's mother tried to take the side of her son, he commented:

"Where is that one going?...I see that those who will fight the white man are lining up? (AOG 88)

We also sense conflict amongst his own sons: Edogo, Nwafo, Oduche and Obika. Ezeulu's favourite son was Nwafo and he saw the future prospects of the chief priest in him which led to Edogo's envy towards his brother. The same jealousy we can sense in behavior of Ojiugo and Obika, kids of Matefi, the second wife of Ezeulu. Ezeulu's sons-Nwafo and Oduche were the best loved of him. Thus growing envy amongst the siblings was a challenge to the authority of the household. Ezeulu's inability to control and unite his own household was as difficult for him as to stop the war between Umuaro and Okperi. He admits to his friend, Akuebue:

With all their power and magic white men would not have overrun entire Olu and Igbo if we did not help them. Who showed them the way to Abame? They were not born there: how then did they find the way? We showed them and are still showing them. So let nobody come to me now and complain that the white man did this or did that. (AOG 131-132)

Because of his internal quest for power as he is not satisfied with just being a watchman and the clash of the old and new religion and the conflict between Ulu and Idemili, Ezeulu could not hear the



call of Ulu when he entered the shrine of Ulu. The toll of the Church bell dispersed the call of Ulu which was also caused by his intrapersonal religious conflict. The failure to hear the call of Ulu brings forth the most crucial conflict: the conflict with self. Now onwards, Ezeulu is at war with himself as the most vicious enemy of Ezeulu is his own self:

“A priest like Ezeulu leads a god to ruin himself...or perhaps a god like Ulu leads a priest to ruin himself.” (AOG 215)

This is the paradoxical sense of self Ezeulu is corrupted and contaminated with. But still nobody could say that he was telling a lie with the name of Ulu. But simultaneously they knew: “Because the six villages allowed the white man to take him away. That is the reason. He has been trying to see how he could punish Umuaro and now he has the chance.” (AOG 215)

We are not fully certain of what actually happened to Obika was due to confused leadership of Ezeulu or not but he himself felt that Ulu punished him because of misusing his power. He cried: “Ulu, were you there when this happened to me?” (AOG 230)

In Obika's death, he felt himself dead. There was no next time for him. He started behaving like a lunatic. He kept asking himself why Ulu had chosen him to strike him down and then cover him with mud:

“What was his offense? Had he not divined the god's will and obeyed it?... But today such a thing had happened before the eyes of all.” (AOG 231)

But justice was met to the people of Umuaro against their headstrong and ambitious priest as “no man however great was greater than his people; that no one ever won judgment against his clan.” (AOG 232). Thus in the end, only Umuaro and its leaders saw the final outcome of abuse of power and poor leadership and they got to the conclusion that no man ever won judgment against his clan.

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