



'An augury of the world's ruin' and the making of the tragic hero in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*



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Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* has been adjudged by critics as a tragic work with Ezeulu as its tragic hero. However, none of these studies has paid detailed attention to the framing of Ezeulu in the historical context of his age. How he appears when compared to a classical Greek tragic hero has also been ignored. A major context giving rise to Ezeulu becoming a tragic hero is the period leading to the synthesis of two contrary histories, juxtaposed discourses and the collision of opposites and contraries in the sociocultural and political sphere of the villages of Umuaro and Okperi. This circumstance is captured by the narrator as 'an augury of the world's ruin', by Nwaka as 'the white man turned us upside down' and by Ezeulu as 'the world is spoilt and there is no longer head or tail in anything that is done'. Allen, an earlier District Commissioner in *Things Fall Apart*, but textually implicated in *Arrow of God*, terms it 'great situations'. The above historical context requires more than mastery and acknowledgement by the tragic figure, in the absence of which he, a self-professed knowledgeable person, becomes a victim of what he failed to take into account. Consequently, he is set aside as a specimen for history and other men. This article will use Hegel's and Aristotle's theories of history and of tragedy, respectively, to explicate the above. It concludes that the tragic hero of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* is substantially the victim of the clash between Umuaro's history and Hegel's History.

'n Teken van die wêreld se ondergang en die skepping van die tragiese held in Chinua Achebe se *Arrow of God*. Chinua Achebe se boek, *Arrow of God*, word deur kritici beskryf as 'n tragedie met die karakter Ezeulu as held. Niemand het egter noukeurige aandag geskenk aan hoe Ezeulu inpas in die gapings van botsende geskiedenis se soos vergestalt in die mens ten opsigte van hulle optredes, houdings, vrese en begeertes nie. Hoe hy voorkom in teenstelling met 'n klassieke Griekse tragiese held, is ook geïgnoreer. 'n Belangrike onderlinge verband wat aanleiding gee tot Ezeulu se status as tragiese held is die tydperk wat lei tot die samevoeging van twee verskillende geskiedenis naas diskoerse en die botsing van teenoorgestelde in die sosiokulturele en politieke sfeer van die dorpie Umuaro en Okperi. Hierdie omstandighede is deur die verteller uitgebeeld as 'n teken van die wêreld se ondergang: deur Nwaka as: 'the white man turned us upside down' en deur Ezeulu as 'the world is spoilt and there is no longer head or tail in anything that is done'. Allen, 'n vorige distrikskommissaris in *Things Fall Apart*, wat aansluit by *Arrow of God*, noem dit 'great situations'. Bogenoemde historiese konteks vereis meer as die bemeestering en erkenning deur die tragiese figuur, 'n selfverklaarde kundige persoon, in die afwesigheid daarvan dat hy 'n slagoffer word van wat hy versuim het om in ag te neem. Gevolglik word hy tersyde gestel as 'n voorbeeld vir die geskiedenis en ander mans. In hierdie artikel sal Hegel en Aristoteles se teorieë van die geskiedenis en van 'n tragedie, onderskeidelik, gebruik word om bogenoemde uiteen te sit. Die gevolgtrekking is dat die tragedie held van Chinua Achebe se *Arrow of God* wesenlik die slagoffer van die botsing tussen die geskiedenis van Umuaro en Hegel is.

Introduction

There are many critical studies of *Arrow of God* and this is not surprising judging from the work's eminent position in not only Chinua Achebe's corpus but also in the African novel. From existing studies, I shall review those which pointedly make reference to it as a tragic work. Bicanic declares that Ezeulu is Achebe's most fully apprehended tragic hero (1972:251). Adeeko, in recognizing *Arrow of God* as a tragedy and by paying less attention to the tragic hero, informs us that the work's conflict is based on appropriated proverbs, which serve as its structural elucidating codes through the textual historical environment. He continues that:

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Much as they are about political control, the tragic conflicts in *Arrow of God* result from what I perceive to be an almost endless jostling for superiority between the authorities of message, meaning, and context. The colonial milieu provides the concrete historical and political boundaries within which these “proverbial” contests play themselves out. (Adeeko 1992:8)

Less explicitly than Adeeko, Nnolim alludes to the tragic form when he declares that Ezeulu’s tragedy arises from his inability to marry rhetoric to reality (2011:46). He attributes stubbornness to Ezeulu, and the consequence of that is his fall. In contrast to Nnolim, Soile sees the grim events in *Arrow of God* from a community perspective, ‘the tragedy of a society’, that of Umuaro as figured in Ezeulu’s (1976:283). From an unanticipated angle, Geetha and Das discover transtraditional qualities worthy of comparison in the character of Ezeulu when they argue that he compares favourably with the tragic heroes of Shakespeare and those of the Greek literary tradition, including Oedipus (2013:3–4). Insightful as these studies are, none of them discusses the details of the tragic form in *Arrow of God* nor do they, as hinted at by Geetha and Das, compare Ezeulu with characters like King Oedipus and any other tragic hero from other literary traditions. Besides Ezeulu being a victim of the cultural, social, political, and metaphysical states of affairs and contradictions of his world, his tragedy substantially inheres in a collision between Umuaro’s history and Hegel’s History.

Ezeulu as a tragic hero

Regarding Ezeulu as a tragic character, I agree with Akwanya and Anohu that the heroic tragic character found in African literature is distinctive as he ‘resembles Nietzsche’s Superman in so far as he stands above mediocrity, but differs from the personage in that he is already realized’ (2001:44). In this case, Ezeulu can be compared with Hamlet, Macbeth, Brutus, King Lear and, most essentially, Oedipus in being a leader and above the common people of his society in reference to his station in life. But if we take Oedipus for the moment, we observe that Ezeulu differs from Oedipus in not being more than a man and very far above the common level. The chorus in *King Oedipus* describes Oedipus as descended from the lineage of gods, and this is not the case with Ezeulu (45). The very first kings of all Greek cities that are portrayed in Greek literature were gods. Take the cases of Thebes and Mycenae. Oedipus’s father, Laius was fathered by Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, who was begotten of Sidon, son of Poseidon, the Greek sea god. Mycenae was founded by Perseus, whose real progenitor was Zeus and was born from Danae, the wife of Danaos. Perseus was to become the first king of the Perseus dynasty, the second beginning with Atreus, Agamemnon’s father. These and many more Greek heroes have gods as their ultimate ancestors, a fact inseparable from their fantastic feats. So, one can say that they are, in terms of the realistic representation of human action, beyond the heroic characters of African literature, though they are leaders of men and are fallible. Does it now mean that Ezeulu and his stock are no longer tragic heroes? I would argue that they clearly are, as

they are above other men in being above the common level. In the case of *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu’s forefather, through whom he descended, was chosen from the weakest and the smallest village to be the priest of Ulu, a god set up by Umuaro to ward off the destructive Abam warriors. Consensus therefore plays a major role in the elevation, on account of service to the community, of the Ezeulus to a high status, above the level of the common Umuaro man. This fact helps explain further Akwanya and Anohu’s remarks that the African hero is above the common level, which is a distinctive feature of African tragic hero, especially those of the Nigerian tradition. Such a hero exists in Soyinka’s *Death and the Kings’ Horseman* (1975), too.

In analysing Ezeulu as being above the common level and the responses leading to his fall, I shall use Western idea of the tragic as theorized by Aristotle. It has become pertinent since Soile’s (1976), Nwoga’s (1981) and Irele’s (1979) earlier works concentrated on the peculiar African circumstance that sets off tragedy in *Arrow of God*. According to Aristotle, *tragedy*, fundamentally, an imitation of action and life, of happiness and misery, is the story or plot of misery or the fall of one who was once happy and exalted (Aristotle 2009: ch.13). Aristotle identifies six components of tragedy: the tragic hero, conflict, *peripety*, *hamartia*, discovery, *katharsis* (fear and pity) and resolution (2009: ch.6.I). The *tragic hero/protagonist* is the character around whom this story revolves. In *conflict*, we are concerned with the forces (including characters, intentionally and unintentionally) of good and evil locking horns in a contest for supremacy as regards the activities of the tragic hero. In all tragedies, the force of evil, with the cooperation of the tragic hero, always wins. *Peripety* is Greek for the reversal of the fortune of the protagonist, whether leading to the protagonist’s downfall or destruction. This reversal of fortune is from happiness to misery not from misery to happiness. *Hamartia*, another element, indicates that the tragic hero has a hand in his own fall or misfortune, which makes him feel the pangs of guilt more. However, it does not mean he is decadent. Yet he is ‘a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity’ (Aristotle 2009: ch.13). Often mistaken for a tragic flaw, *hamartia*’s common form in Greek tragedy is *hubris*, or pride, the audacious confidence leading a protagonist to shrug off a divine warning or to violate an important moral law. Discovery means awareness (ch.11). With *peripety*, which often depends on discovery, both being ‘the most powerful elements of attraction in Tragedy’ (ch.6.II), it forms part of the tragic plot. Discovery, the point where the tragic hero comes to the realization of something of great importance previously unknown to him, elicits from readers empathy. Though not depressed, readers’ *kathartic* empathy for him purifies or purges. Hence, *katharsis* is ‘purgation’ or ‘purification’. The audience feels relieved or even exalted through the pleasure of pity and terror. These twin emotions, always attached to the tragic plot, differentiate the tragic form from the comic and they are a consequence of discovery



and *peripety*. With the resolution (*denouement*) all conflicts and competing interests are resolved as the protagonist and/or villain is punished or rewarded.

One would have expected that in interpreting Ezeulu's tragic life, the contradictions inherent in his world should preoccupy this essay. But no critical study of the work, foremost among them being Irele's (1979:20 & 2001:258), has done that. Irele, echoing Tucker's discussion of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, refers to Ezeulu as 'a world historical figure', a figure in whose life one observes the interrelationship of the forces of his age, though he is neither a sovereign nor a history-maker (2001:258; 2006:97; Tucker 1967:83). Interestingly, the term is Hegel's (Tucker 1967:83). Amongst other things, Irele argues elsewhere that 'two ways of thought' clashed (1979:20), leaving behind the irony of history that tips Ezeulu over the precipice in a grand tragedy that convinces readers of the mistake of a sage (Irele 2001:258). However, examining his arguments closely, he seems to be heeding Amuta's call that the best way to read African literature is to read it against the overall context of its emergence, because this literature, from the oral to the written, is incontrovertibly, sociohistorically determined (1989:77). Six categories, namely, history, the mediating subject, the literary event (the end product of the mediating subjects attempt to imaginatively recreate a sociopolitical event in a literary form), context, content and form, to him, are the indispensable signposts aiding the reading of African literature (pp. 82–87). Borrowing from Hegel, he terms this reading the 'dialectical alternative' (p. 77). Whilst I recognize that history is foremost in determining the reading of African literature as theorised by Amuta and as exemplified in Irele's reading of *Arrow of God* (1979:10–21), I consider this *history* as not sufficiently accounted for by both scholars as it concerns the history of the white man and that of the African. Hegel has given a most compelling account of how history universally engenders contradictions.

Therefore, in examining the form of *Arrow of God* as a tragedy in relation to the making of Ezeulu as its tragic hero, the article shall pay attention to the above elements as explained by Aristotle as well as use the insights developed by Akwanya and Anohu and the dialectical process of History as theorized by Hegel. The context from which Ezeulu emerges would be factored into the explication of the above only to the extent that the far-reaching roles played by History and the histories of Umuaro in leading Ezeulu on until he falls into infamy and misery can be laid bare. This necessitates the use of the Hegelian theory of history because it properly accounts for the evolution of mankind from one stage to the other owing to the contribution of individuals, subjective beings, to the objective entity, the 'Objective Mind' or 'a universal spirit – a world-mind' (which I term *History* with an upper case 'H', and the New Order, or the Universal Mind) (Hegel 1894:20, 303). The Objective Mind is the sum total of all

contributions to the historical process that led to the fluid and evanescent situation we have today. Hegel describes this as follows:

As the mind of a special nation is actual and its liberty is under natural conditions, it admits on this nature-side the influence of geographical and climatic qualities. It is in time; and as regards its range and scope, has essentially a *particular* principle on the lines of which it must run through a development of its consciousness and its actuality. It has, in short, a history of its own. But as a restricted mind its independence is something secondary; it passes into universal world-history, the events of which exhibit the dialectic of the several national minds, – the judgment of the world. (p. 306)

Hegel conceives this History as a universal process where all tribes, nations, states and indeed people occupy their apposite yet contributory positions. This process has its own inherent working logic, which he terms the dialectical process. This process consists of several components that contribute to the whole in such a way that every stage or age-as-component advances world civilization in a unique manner. Certain features necessary for advancement, he claims, are enduring legacies of our forebears, the peculiar preconditional circumstances for the maintenance of these legacies and the inherent oppositions at work in these legacies for movement and progress to come about. Whilst the first two, the lasting legacies of a preceding era and preconditional circumstances for these legacies, can be articulated as the 'thesis' of the Historical process, the last, intrinsic conflict working in these legacies, qualifies as the process's 'antithesis'. Here is how Hegel describes the fusion of this process in either History or history, through the elaborate form of a mutually modulating subject-object thinking process, our consciousness:

As the ego is by itself only a formal identity, the dialectical movement of its intelligible unity, i.e. the successive steps in further specification of consciousness, does not to it [*sic*] seem to be its own activity, but is implicit, and to the ego it seems an alteration of the object. Consciousness consequently appears differently modified according to the difference of the given object; and the gradual specification of consciousness appears as a variation in the characteristics of its objects. Ego, the subject of consciousness, is thinking: the logical process of modifying the object is what is identical in subject and object, their absolute interdependence, what makes the object the subject's own. (pp. 214–215)

Because of this, History can neither be deemed to be totally independent of subject as pure object nor totally dependent on the subject as a nonobject. The subject's and the object's functioning together, being interactive, is imperative for History's configuration, in the mutually reforming reconfiguration that ensues. One stage of (re) configuration must succeed another, as every 'synthesis' would in turn eventually become another thesis in its own right. Thus, H/history lays hold of the internal irony inherent within itself or 'the dialectic, implicit in it' (p. 219), which is dependent of the will and consciousness of both individuals and institutions. Therefore, the necessities of H/history changes into their opposites as one (st)age



substitutes for the other in a fashion that alarms pundits and those who obviously believed before now that they have mastered it. In Hegel's words: 'Each stage therefore either stands to that preceding it as an antithesis, which inevitably dogs its steps as an accusing spirit, or it is the conjunction of the original thesis with the antithesis' (p. 25). The thesis ensuing after a synthesis cannot be equated to the earlier one; this has its own wholly differing peculiarities in the historical process. This synthesis-now-a-thesis forms the third component of Hegel's theory of the Universal Mind described hereunder:

The third sub-section of the theory of Objective Mind describes a state of affairs in which this antithesis is explicitly overcome. This is the moral life in a social community. Here law and usage prevail and provide the fixed permanent scheme of life: but the law and the usage are, in their true or ideal conception, only the unforced expression of the mind and will of those who live under them. And, on the other hand, the mind and will of the individual members of such a community are pervaded and [xxxi] animated by its universal spirit. In such a community, and so constituting it, the individual is at once free and equal, and that because of the spirit of fraternity, which forms its spiritual link. (p. 20)

Above, we are let into the theoretical radix of the conflict generated in History or in Hegelian terms, the confrontation of, for clarity's sake, two histories in *Arrow of God* and how Ezeulu is caught in the fray and is unmade.

Umuaro national mind

There is a sense in which Hegel's theory could apply to the history (denoted and differentiated from 'History' with the lower case 'h') of the indigenous people of Achebe's *Arrow of God*, before the coming of the white man. What was the mind of Umuaro before the white man came, at least, from some indigenous cultural residues and matrices yet visible after the bulldozing presence of the white man was established? In other words, what can be pointed to as the 'particular principle [of Umuaro's history] on the lines of which it must run through a development of its consciousness and its actuality' (Hegel 1984:306)? Does it really have 'a history of its own' (p. 306)? The history of Umuaro as the thesis of *Arrow of God* was one of equanimity, hope, respect for neighbours and protection of common interests. We observe nuggets suggestive of these values in their sacrifices, marriages, wise-sayings, maxims, well-wishes and, most prominently, in their prayers (to which the other elements are subsidiary) to their gods. One of these gods is Ulu, who occupies a central, spiritual, existential and cosmic place in Umuaro's life. He is the god who protects and yearly cleanses Umuaro from past sins, say of the previous year, as they look hopefully forward to the future. Two examples of such prayers would be adequate. The first is made by Ezeulu, the chief priest himself on behalf of Umuaro, and the other by Ugoye, a worshipper who prays on behalf of herself, her family. She throws the leafy emblems of cleansing at Ezeulu, the Chief Priest and mediator between the community and Ulu. Here is Ezeulu's prayer:

Ulu, I thank you for making me see another new moon. May I see it again and again. This household may it be healthy and prosperous. As this is the moon of planting may the six villages plant with profit. May we escape danger in the farm – the bite of a snake or the sting of the scorpion, the mighty one of the scrubland. May we not cut our shinbone with the matchet or the hoe. And let our wives bear male children. May we increase in numbers at the next counting of the villages so that we shall sacrifice to you a cow, not a chicken as we did after the last New Yam feast. May children put their fathers into the earth and not fathers their children. May good meet the face of every man and every woman. Let it come to the land of the riverain folk and to the land of the forest peoples. (Achebe 1964:6)

Ezeulu asks for health, prosperity, planting for profit, male children, population increase (patrilineally attributable to male children), the cherished notion of fathers dying at good old age and buried by their children and not the reverse, and the good and well-being of all humanity, conceived by Ezeulu as the riverine and forest peoples. These are not just wishful thinking; they are so deeply rooted in the cosmology of the people that a slight contravention of any of them could trigger fatal consequences, for instance, like the fall of Ezeulu. From this prayer, we glean that Ezeulu, along with the Umuaros, considers the well-being of his neighbour as well and is prepared to moderate his activities and actions according to his belief in right living. After this prayer, Ugoye, representing the individual worshipper, also prays to Ulu:

Great Ulu who kills and saves, I implore you to cleanse my household of all defilement. If I have spoken it with my mouth or seen it with my eyes, or if I have heard it with my ears or stepped on it with my foot or if it has come through my children or my friends or kinsfolk let it follow these leaves. (p. 72)

However, the most singular emphatic evidence, in practical terms, of Umuaro history tied to their worship and deities, is in regard to the coming of Ulu, the god they invited when their common survival, a major element in their prayers and wishes, was threatened by Abam warriors:

Then the hired soldiers of Abam used to strike in the dead of night, set fire to their houses and carry men, women and children into slavery. Things were so bad for the six villages that their leaders came together to save themselves. They hired a strong team of medicine-men to install a common deity for them. This deity which the fathers of the six villages made was called Ulu. Half of the medicine was buried at a place which became Nkwo market and the other half thrown into the stream which became MiliUlu. The six villages then took the name of Umuaro, and the priest of Ulu became their Chief Priest. From that day they were never again beaten by an enemy. (p. 15)

If there is a deity, there must be a priest as well, but how was Ulu's priest installed? The priest's origin is intricately connected with his responsibilities. As an intermediary between the community and the deity, he, one 'transformed into a spirit' (p. 189), is to confront danger for his clan. Ezeulu, thus becomes (spiritual) leader of men, whose history is intertwined with Umuaro's. He becomes, in Aristotle's words, a man 'of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity' (Aristotle 2009). When he



falls from this, he becomes a tragic hero. Through the installation of Ulu and his chief priest, the six villages became a clan and a community, and they lived in peace and unity until a contradiction emerges in the form of a land dispute between them and Okperi. It was on this occasion that Ezeulu, the spiritual head who should have led the fight against the rest of the community, chose the path of truth and honesty on account of his devotion to the god Ulu.

Recognizable above is the essential segment of Umuaro history when nature met the preternatural and the human met the superhuman. Here we can also trace the configuration of the hero, the tragic hero of *Arrow of God* as we step back into history to discover the making of his ancestors up to the very first Chief Priest of Ulu. Ezeulu is a distinct type of the African tragic hero who becomes a leader of men as a result of the consensus of his autochthonous group and the submission of his will to that consensus. Seeing that all were people from society's lower class, in Akwanya's and Anohu's terms (2001), they agree to make one of themselves many degrees higher in order to sustain and perpetuate life. The willing leader must make sacrifices in order to continue to be the leader—leadership and sacrifices are thus tied together. If this accord as presented in *Arrow of God* has far-reaching cosmic, biological and agricultural effects, then it means the claims of Ogbuefi Nwaka that the Igbo have no king and have not made one are clearly invalid. By installing the first Ezeulu, the Chief Priest and the ancestor of the present Ezeulu, and the children after them as their spiritual leaders in order to survive, they had inadvertently made them saviours and rulers as well, only it was not properly designated and described as such.

Ezeulu does therefore fit into Akwanya's and Anohu's thinking regarding the African tragic hero: he gained acceptability and credibility and was a man above the common level. Like Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Obi Okonkwo' in *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and Elesin Oba in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Ezeulu is made a hero by some communal accord. He is chosen from common people and not born from divinity. In Ezeulu and Elesin Oba, nobility and sacrifice are lumped together, on one hand, and on the other, commoners are people who elevate one of their kind from a low to a high station for communal service – something akin to democratic leadership. In *Arrow of God*, the hereditary character of the priesthood, the fact that Ezeulu's skull is separated from his body when he dies and that he is the carrier of Umuaro's sins all set him apart, not only as a leader but also as a leader-servant. Akuebue puts this in the correct perspective:

[t]hat was why our ancestors when they were pushed beyond the end of things by the warriors of Abam sacrificed not a stranger but one of themselves and made the great medicine which they call Ulu. (Achebe 1964:134)

To me, this characteristic of a segment of African narratives that they also include traditional mode of cultural behaviour, specifically, works by the first-generation modern African

writers. The heroes of these narratives are ordinary people, in contrast to the Greek heroes who descended from kings and gods. Ezeulu also differs greatly from the white man's conception of the hero, which the white man misperceives in him or which he wishes to make him be – a major cause of the clash that brings Ezeulu down.

The entire community was content to accept Ezeulu's cardinal place in the Umuaro clan as their history ordains until the Umuaro-Okperi land dispute surfaced, which set off the rivalry and hate between Ezeulu and Nwaka. This clash represents a major contradiction within the Umuaro mind. This inherent incongruity for Hegel anticipates evolution. That Ezeulu holds on to the truth that they were all aware of lays the foundation on which, after the war generated by the dispute was abruptly brought to an end by colonizers, Ogbuefi Nwaka, the Eru-made wealthy orator, enters into conflict with Ezeulu and the quarter of Umuaro he hails from, Umunneora. He discerns, though through malice, that the mystic stature of Ezeulu can be demystified. In this regard, and paradoxically, too, the common interest in mutual preservation, their foremost wish and for which Ulu was set up, is misused by Ogbuefi Nwaka, Ezidemili and the white man. From this strategy for the tragic form of *Arrow of God* could assume its sublimity.

If the entire Umuaro knew that the enmity between Ezeulu and Nwaka was coming to the point of 'kill and take the head' (p. 38), then there is good reason to believe that somebody will be killed, if not now, perhaps, later. Only that one would not be sure who's head it would be. Nwaka presents one of the internal contradictions of Umuaro's history. He represents pride, propaganda and possessive power, three things that easily break the cord of communality and quickly cast a pall over the truth. But because of his unmatched eloquence and pseudo-logical reasoning, he leaves the people who ordinarily are aware of the truth, as Ogbuefi Ofoka says, 'confused' (p. 188). After his abominable attacks against Ezeulu, people waited to hear him suffer retribution from Ulu, but that did not happen. In a way, Ulu has become lazy in punishing offenders, the very first signs of disintegration in Umuaro as the centre of its spiritual unity seems to bare itself. It would only be a matter of time before his priest would follow suit and when that happens, Ulu would be no more. Then, one can predict that the six villages would go their separate ways, a return to *status quo ante*, a thing that would have been impracticable had the colonisers not come. In all these disruptions – cosmic, social, political, and otherwise—the part played by the white man and the History he champions is significant.

Okperi history and the Universal Mind

Long before (and after) the coming of the white man, the history of the Umuaro, representing the space of Umuaro and Okperi and that of the Igbo race, has had its own share of incongruity though one would have little qualms arguing



that both clans belong to the same ethnic stock with no difference at all when one considers the concept of 'ethnic' in all its semantic ramifications. Take the case of the land dispute and the intertribal wars fought, for instance. But all these taken together, nothing was as dense and intense as the appearance of the white man on African soil and the adverse consequences of his History and presence. In contrast to Umuaro, Okperi freely welcomed the white man, though they would not remain unaffected by the colonial administration. In giving room to the stranger, Okperi allows the foreign consciousness, in many respects the custodian and the bringer of History to get in, take root and unfold its assimilating process so much so that with the elapse of time, it became the major consciousness, substituting for the host history in a most dislodging manner. Okperi can, after the white man's coming, be seen as synonymous with this stranger's History. Because whatever goes on at Umuaro is moderated by Okperi, Okperi has become, strangely enough, the representative of King George in the disruptive wave of colonial conquest. Okperi has become England of sorts, England Okperi, in the same way England is the West and the West England if the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 is anything to go by. The Universal Mind has come to stay at Okperi, a 'conquered territory' as it oversees Umuaro, a yet to be conquered one. It hosts the antithesis to the Umuaro thesis.

The white man's presence, represented by Captain Winterbottom, Mr Clarke, Roberts, Wade and Wright, is antithetical to the history of Umuaro and Okperi. These white men have come to heed the call and the burden History has bequeathed them. We glean this from Allen:

Is it only for the desk our youngsters read of Drake and Frobisher, of Nelson, Clive and men like Mungo Park? Is it for the counting-house they learn of Carthage, Greece and Rome? No, no; a thousand times no! The British race will take its place, the British blood will tell. Son after son ... playing his best in the game of life (p. 33).

So, with the King's lieutenants doing his biddings precisely and reporting to the Lieutenant-Governor in Enugu, who in turn reports to the Governor in Lagos, Nigeria, in the 'dark' hinterland of Africa, it is evident that the Africa they meet will never be the same again. Beyond the widest imagination of the people of Umuaro and Okperi, they now have an abhorrent prison yard, police, public works, a court, an incomprehensible hospital system, a chaotic religion, a strange administration, bizarre statutes and an eccentric sort of language through which all these institutions are run. With all these changes coming in torrents as the white man establishes his presence in Okperi, the people are viciously coerced – annihilated like the Abame or seemingly harmlessly assimilated through the most methodic 'othering' [viewing those different from oneself as inferior (Dobie 2009:210)] – by means of education and religion, core 'ideological state apparatuses' (Althusser 1971: n.p.). In some cases, both are resorted to for effective and precise control of the Africans' interpreting faculties. These methods are the devices that History, through the white man and his agents, uses to overcome this peculiar African consciousness. Through these

methods, History not only proves itself antithetical to the Umuaro–Okperi thesis that subsisted from time immemorial but also vanquishes the African in the synthesis that ensues, with grave consequences. With the coming of History, Umuaro's consciousness begins to be differently modified as the difference of the given object, Universal Mind, encroaches on their world-space, the Umuaro mind. This sets them thinking, the process with which they make sense of what now confronts them. The ego defences of the people of Umuaro and Okperi are thus broken down.

Because *Arrow of God* is set in Umuaro and most characters are from there, it would be worth noting how Umuaro imagined the white man and all that he represents. That is, how did they understand the History the white man makes possible, on one hand, and what sweeping effects did this have in the community of white men at Government Hill and the incidents leading to the fall of the tragic hero, Ezeulu, on the other. They have had to conceive of the antithesis in some way whether exact or not. When he set foot on Igbo land, 'many oracles prophesied' that 'the white man had come to take over the land and rule' (Achebe 1964:42). The white man was so strange that his presence was interpreted as divine intervention. Even the chief priest Ezeulu's accepted these prophecies – a major reason why he sent his son, Oduche to the mission school in order to 'be my eyes' and 'to see and hear for me' (pp. 189, 220). The factor that, however, limited the successful appraising of the strange phenomenon of the white man were the scanty means for interaction that the Umuaros had left. What would have been ideal is a mutually intelligible language for making sense of the white man. Lacking such a language, what they understand of the white man is fed to them by divinity, a third party and what they themselves glean, and the last two are grossly insufficient for making sound judgements in the day-to-day dealings with the white man. Thus, if we were to be let into the white man in Umuaro's imagination, we would need to make do with what very few characters say. One of them is Moses Unachukwu, a well-travelled man and Umuaro's first Christian convert. His insights are most valuable and credible. He relates that:

I have travelled in Olu and I have travelled in Igbo, and I can tell you that there is no escape from the white man.... He does not fight with one weapon alone. (pp. 84–85)

The ambivalent nature of the white man can be felt in thinking minds like Ezeulu's, too. After his son, Oduche had trapped the royal python in his box, Ezeulu's thoughts are revealed to the reader:

His mind turned from the festival to the new religion. He was not sure what to make of it ... he had agreed to send his son, Oduche, to learn the new ritual. He also wanted him to learn the white man's wisdom...

But now Ezeulu was becoming afraid that the new religion was like a leper. Allow him a handshake and he wants to embrace... Perhaps the time had come to bring him out again. But what would happen if, as many oracles prophesied, that the white man had come to take over the land and rule? (p. 42).



Though the Umuaros resent the white man, he has already started infiltrating the thoughts of the Umuaro clanspeople. Nwodika's son, 'Johnu' [*for John*], a name given to him by the first white man he meets because he could not pronounce 'Nwabueze', his original name, is one of them. At Government Hill, Okperi, where Ezeulu is kept in a guardroom and at the prompting of Ezeulu's visitors, Johnu narrates how he came to accept a job from the white man. He gives insights into his and Umuaro's 'backwardness' in the things of the white man. As a skilful dancer touring villages, he was introduced to a white man by his friend. He was asked 'to leave dancing and join in the race of the white man's money' (p. 169). He, the white man, becomes the domestic protocol officer and puts 'things in order in his house' (p. 170). Besides offering his service to the colonial administration, he intends entering into trade for tobacco or for cloth. He highlights Umuaro's insulation and consequent backwardness in this regard:

People from other places are gathering much wealth in this trade and in the trade for cloth. People from Elumelu, Aninta, Uuofia, Mbaino, they control the great new market. They decide what goes on in it. Is there one Umuaro man among the wealthy people here? Not one. Sometimes I feel shame when others ask me where I come from. We have no share in the market; we have no share in the white man's office; we have no share anywhere. (p. 170)

The coming of the white man and the History he champions introduce deep and disruptive changes in the Umuaro mode of life, be it the medium of exchange, the names of the local people or trades before now unknown. In another instance, the white man's Universal Mind is the cause of the gradual change in what serves as dowries and bride prices. The narrator enumerates the following items taken to the bride's new home: 'cooking-pots, wooden bowls, brooms, mortar, pestle, baskets, mats, ladles, pots of palm oil, baskets of cocoyam, smoked fish, fermented cassava, locust beans, heads of salt and pepper' but adds that:

[T]here were also two lengths of cloth, two plates, and an iron pot. These last were products of the white man and had been bought at the new trading post at Okperi. (p. 115)

Evidences of the Universal History found expression in items of sacrifice, too, though this time beyond Umuaro, around the region of Nkisa where the big hospital was. At the roadside an unusual sacrifice was made:

two fully grown cocks, palm fronds, a clay bowl with two lobes of kola nut, a piece of white chalk, and surprisingly, an English florin bearing the head of George the Fifth (p. 161).

Indeed, the consciousness of the people has been deeply affected.

Therefore, all the villages around Umuaro have been brutally subdued by this History and it would be a thing of great wonder if this community, Umuaro, could hold out for long. However destructive this history is to other histories or history in Africa, those who herald it would

never be the same as when they left England, their home and the West, for their consciousness, too, has been modified by their presence in Africa. As Umuaro's history passes into the Universal Mind, the consciousness of both contesting groups is bound to change. The consciousness of the white man would therefore vary according to the differences he encounters in dealing with natives in ways that suit him best and that agree with the principles underscored by the Universal Mind. He must put his mind to work through his ego and that is thinking. New ideas would be generated as new reactions emanate from their hosts. Consequently, in a classic case, the white man's stimulus and Umuaros response typify Hegel's proposition that 'the logical process of modifying the object is what is identical in subject and object, their absolute interdependence, what makes the object the subjects own' (p. 215). The colonialists, as far as my knowledge goes, never in modern times practised the Indirect Rule system of government. The situation in Africa shifted their thinking in this direction and they implemented it. Prompted by the exigency to acquire and administer vast territories with minimum cost but with maximum control, a system of Paramount Chiefs, the arrow head of the British indirect rule system in African territories, was imposed on other places. Umuaro seemed to be next. But the experiment with James Ikedi in Okperi was a woeful failure as he became the political version of what Nwaka fears and was greatly concerned about regarding Ezeulu's spiritual value.

So on the part of the white man, a lot of adaptations have taken place both in the colony and in England. The promoters of History, or the egos on which depended the Universal Mind for support and progress through the interrelationships of object and subject, the then European powers, had their wars, the First and Second World Wars. These are signs of this History's jagged protuberance. Stakeholders in the Universal Mind, the nations of the then world desired to acquire more territories. The wars they fought were provoked by this desire. It seems to be the reason why it was fought on many fronts and in very many sites across the world. War is the most glaring evidence of the internal contradiction Hegel spoke about in history, with adverse effects on both nations and individuals, and not surprisingly, on the colonies acquired or wished to be acquired. That was why Captain Winterbottom fought the Germans in the Cameroon; his wife eloped with a young countryman in faraway Britain; the colonialists felt the Africans should see their image of inferiority in their superiority, a notion that depended on the successful acquisition of the Africans' territory; and why he, Winterbottom, became 'too serious to sleep with native women' against his conscience and the wise counsel of his better self (Achebe 1964:103).

These are all contradictions within the History that arrived with the colonialists, and also instance where the Umuaro thesis adjusted their consciousness just as the Umuaros' is also adjusted. What about the colonial administrative strand



of the mission in Africa? Winterbottom's opinion of the fellows in Enugu is contrary to theirs. He says:

Words, words, words. Civilization, African mind, African atmosphere. Has His Honour ever rescued a man buried alive up to his neck, with a piece of roast yam on his head to attract vultures? (p. 56)

Many of the colonial administrators work with an eye towards being promoted or getting the O.B.E., but Winterbottom is unlike the others. He frequently speaks his mind and this costs him his promotions. Like Winterbottom, Clark and Wright are contemptuous of Headquarters as well. So when History with all the inconsistencies in its inherent drive to make progress meets the history of the Umuaro and Okperi, crises ensue and the villages are eventually subjugated. These circumstances provoke different remarks from different people, but their meaning is the same. This troubling collision is expressed by the white man, the strangers to Umuaro, and the black man, Umuaros, in several charged expressions. The major context within which Ezeulu becomes a tragic hero is the clash between two opposite discourses. The narrator calls it 'an augury of the worlds ruin' (p. 7) and situates it 'in these days of the white man' (p. 141). Nwaka says the 'white man turned us upside down' (p. 16). Ezeulu thinks 'the world is spoilt and there is no longer head or tail in anything that is done' (p. 27); it is 'the very end of things' (p. 133), 'these days' (p. 204) and 'the ruin of the world' (p. 15). Anichebe Udeozo describes it as '[t]hese are not the times we used to know' (pp. 207, 208). Allen calls it 'great situations' (p. 33). This uncharacteristic situation informs Nwaka's flippant reference to Ulu as: 'He is still our protector, even though we no longer fear Abam warriors at night' (p. 28), a remark he would not have made had the white man not come and had Ezeulu not given truthful testimony at the white man's court against Umuaro in his community's land dispute with Okperi. The court would not have been present without the white man and Ezeulu would not have been invited to testify. The quality of honesty in Ezeulu, in contrast to Chief Ikedi's lack of faith, would have gone unnoticed. So Ezeulu would not have been invited the second time to be made a Paramount Chief and would least of all not have been angered by the Corporal's haughtiness. Lastly, he would have eaten the sacred yams seasonably and the tragedy of Ezeulu would have been averted.

Against the background of the strange times occasioned by the consciousness antithetical to the thesis he was familiar with, Ezeulu takes a decision that would secure his future whilst retaining the gains of the present: he sends his son Oduche to see for him against the wise counsel of a friend like Akuebue and others. He does this three years after the Umuaro-Okperi land case was settled on the counsel of Winterbottom. Viewing it closely, there seems to be something professional in agreeing to send Oduche to the white man for which he is castigated and held in a bad light. Ezeulu acted true to his profession, a mystic and spiritual man. He saw what others did not see. He did not see the white man's money or trade in cloth or tobacco like John

Nwodika did. He saw the violence and high handedness represented by *iga*, the handcuffs meant for lunatics in the Umuaro imagination, though actually meant for arrested persons. He did not see government positions and authority. He saw the white man's magic (p. 125), his deity and the new religion as the new ritual which he feels, as a family of Chief Priests, one of his sons, Oduche, should learn (p. 42). He is a very astute but particular Umuaro priest. Ezeulu anticipated in sending his son to learn the white man's ways was to take Ogbuefi Nwaka, with all his wit, vivacity and logical expressiveness five years after his cankering antagonism made certain Ezeulu was on his way down, before sending his son to the white man's school.

Regrettably, Ezeulu's good judgement and foresight became his *hamartia*, because the times have changed. Umuaro could put up with him leading them into danger. But, although eminently qualified to do so, they could not tolerate that he carry his functions and duties over to the things of the white man. Here, he exceeds his bounds and lends a hand in his own downfall. Although he tries to convince those close to him, from his friends to his children, of the perspicacity in his action, he is perceived as doing an unusual, desecrating deed. Akuebue, his good friend tells him:

[n]o man however great can win judgement against a clan. You may think you did in that land dispute but you are wrong. Umuaro will always say that you betrayed them before the white man. And they will say that you are betraying them again today by sending your son to join in desecrating the land. (p. 131)

This is one layer of his multilayered *hubris*. As a consequence of the dual components of his office – a leader of men and a messenger of divinity – his tragic destiny rests on the fact that his good intention and insightful assessment of the present situation is spoken evil of. But should he listen to what the community is saying in order to avoid the impending disaster? Historically, he is, in the first instance a Chief Priest whom the entire community set up and sacralised, who should be listened to. How can he now turn around to be the one to listen to this same community? No precedent for that exists, and Ezeulu does not want to set such a precedent. Hear him as he responds to Akuebue concerning what Nwaka says and Umuaro feels:

I am not troubled about them [Nwaka and Ezidemili]. What troubles me is what the clan is saying. Who tells the clan what it says? What does the clan know? (p. 131)

In another instance, he responds:

I have my own way and I shall follow it. I can see things when other men are blind. That is why I am Known and at the same 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 dances. I can see tomorrow. (p. 132)

Ezeulu's *hubris*, this arrogant self-assurance regarding what should be done is clear here.



Nevertheless, we have little to reproach Ezeulu for, given that he acts in line with the Umuaro mind that supported him, the thesis that existed prior to the showing up of the white man on the scene. Ezeulu did not realise that a radical change was underway with the arrival of the stranger. His argument, resting on the earlier history, cuts no ice in the present time. The demands for truthfulness, the sort exhibited at the land dispute trial and the annual bearing of Umuaro's sins in line with his office, untested hitherto, are now being tested. Winterbottom latches onto the ambiguity of Ezeulu as Priest-King [his translation of *Eze*, for King ignorantly leaves off *Eze*, which also stands for Priest] (p. 107). With this improper appraisal by the antithesis encountered by the thesis and this inadequate understanding of autochthonous peoples, Ezeulu is earmarked for the position of a warrant chief direly needed for the effective administration of the colonized peoples. Winterbottom is so entrenched in History that he thinks that any African, or any man for that matter, would willingly accept the offer of power and that there could be no exception to his theory of universal desire for power in mankind. As Ezeulu hails from the Umuaro mind, being full of the consciousness of this order, a conflict is imminent. Ezeulu is locked up in the guardroom for 32 days, a period long enough to prevent him from seeing the moon and ushering in the rituals preparatory to the festival of the Pumpkin Leaves and also long enough to activate the lurking desire for revenge on Umuaro in him – on the leaders and not the commoners of Umuaro. For the leaders asked him to confront the white man alone and to bear all the humiliations at the white man's hands for his impeccable innocence in all his dealings and his complete faithfulness to the office of Chief Priest, the position given to his ancestors and likewise to him by the people of Umuaro themselves. Ezeulu suffers for being faithful to the old order when many competing voices were in the air, Nwaka's accusations being the loudest, saying that, having betrayed the old order to welcome the New Order *in toto*, Ezeulu was now seeking favour with the white man. He may have allowed his son to join the white man's school, but he was only seeing into the future. He may have told the truth in the land case, but he was only being faithful to Ulu. However, he would never be the white man's Chief. Such a thing would do a disservice both to Ulu and to future generations of Ezeulus – the future that he is in a way trying to secure by sending Oduche to the white man's establishment. After his return from his humiliating exile at Okperi, he decides to exert his authority once more by lashing out at Umuaro's elders for not supporting him in his mortification at the hands of the white man and in rebuffing entreaties to break tradition and finish the leftover sacred yams in order to avoid the devastating two months delay in the yam harvest. At this point, Ezeulu suddenly discovers that another arm of the Universal Mind, the new religion, was close at hand to aid his fall. This recalls Unachukwu's insightful remarks that '[t]he white man, the new religion, the soldiers, the new road – they are all part of the same thing. [...] He does not fight with one weapon alone'.

John Jaja Good country cashes in on Ezeulu's effort to remain true to the old discipline by telling the people that if they made their thank-offering to God [the god of the Christians (p. 216)], they could harvest their crops without fear of Ulu (p. 215). Ezeulu quickly realizes that the game was up, but not before Obika dies mysteriously and he asks: Ulu, were you there when this happened to me? (p. 229). This is *peripety* and discovery, reversal of fortune and a moment of insight in one. It is possible that Ezeulu does not physically die and therefore was not in a wretched state, but the narrator portrays its impact on Ezeulu as a kind of death: 'It was as though he had died' (p. 229). Degradation, loss of prestige and authority came with Obika's death. Some scholars have ascribed Obika's death to Ulu using his whip on Ezeulu for attempting to be greater than his community (Adeeko 1992:13; Nwoga 1981:18). It could be true, but equally true is that Ulu chastising his priest or abandoning him before his enemies amounted to 'inciting people to take liberties' (Achebe 1964:230). In truth, Achebe made an artistically deft move by leaving it unclear who or what was punishing Ezeulu. There is resolution, *dénouement*, quite alright, but who is punishing or rewarding who and who particularly is the sole victim? We can make out Ezeulu's silhouette here, but are the Umuaros free? Besides, because Ulu has always wanted to be relevant, it is impossible that he may have struck Obika dead, for in so doing, he banished himself and beckoned to the white man's god to take his place. Ezeulu's rhetorical question is his discovery and *peripety*, his discovery of what until then was unknown to him in all the years of his dealings with both Ulu and Umuaro. Whether it is Ulu or his enemy amongst the Umuaros that has done it, this enemy is a representative of Umuaro in carrying out their wish at such a dangerous time. What is clear is that the times have changed and that the period of the clash between Umuaro mind and the Universal History would leave no one undamaged.

Synthesis: Ezeulu and the 'Augury of the World's Ruin'

With Ezeulu's fall, Umuaro would never be united again. Ulu and his Chief Priest have been demystified; the symbols the community created have been unmade. The institution of the Chief Priesthood of Ulu, if it ever continues to exist, would either remain at the margins of Umuaro consciousness or subserviently co-exist with the white man's religion. Umuaro would henceforth live with both religions. Synthesis has become synonymous with *dénouement*. Borrowing insights from Hegel, we find that with Ezeulu's fall the mind and will of the individual members of the Umuaro society have become suffused and animated by the universal spirit, History. In this sort of community, and so constituting it, the individual is at once free and equal, and that is because of the spirit of fraternity, which forms its spiritual link (Achebe 1964:20). This is a fact exemplified by Ezeulu himself in his sweeping the front of his Obi in preparation to welcoming mourners, a thing he never did in his days of authority. What condescension after the death of Obika and his consequent humiliation!



Nonetheless, we must note that in this synthesis a thesis is forming, for the fall of Ezeulu would mean that the white man would rise to be the only authority in the land. Hence, the white man is the present 'Ezeulu', if the History he espouses would really gain a foothold. He would thenceforth determine the harvest and take the people's sins away as Ezeulu was wont to do. He would even determine what is sinful and what is not. In fact, the lives of the Umuaro would be changed forever.

On the other hand, the white man, through his religion, may have overcome the Umuaro history embodied in Ezeulu, but his power to ride roughshod over the people of Umuaro and Okperi has been dented by Ezeulu's dogged refusal to be a Paramount Chief, a confounding phenomenon to the white man's consciousness. A stage in his unified consciousness has once more, emerged. Ogbuefi Nwaka, and indeed the Umuaro world have no grounds for accusing Ezeulu that he contributed to the desecration of the land.

Conclusion

This synthesis is but another age, the age Africa is in at present, where the thesis – history – has been swallowed up by the antithesis – history – as the former object becomes part of the latter and as the latter becomes one convoluted behemoth sometimes articulated as globalization. Ezeulu resisted History, but was crushingly defeated. But did this encounter with the African subject not change History? Would it be logical to surmise that Ezeulu's noble status, forged from an authentic and autochthonous African wisdom and tradition, is brought down by the collision between Umuaro's history and the Universal Mind, thus making him a tragic hero? I answer in the affirmative. His fall is the advent of the present-day global world palpably present in Africa.

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