



## COMMUNAL CEREMONIES AND FESTIVALS IN *ARROW OF GOD*

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### Abstract

Traditional African people have peculiar opinions, beliefs, customs, and rituals and these are handed down from generation to generation. African people are proud of its rich cultural heritage and mythology which are as rich and ancient as any civilization in the world. The Igbo people have their own religion and they consider it as a way of life, the basis of Igbo culture as well as morality. It guides and controls their lives too. African people believe in polytheistic worship. Therefore, they have several gods and demi-gods, and the gods assigned with particular tasks. They not only worship the gods but also their ancestors and natural objects such as the sun, the moon, trees etc. Traditional African people are highly superstitious. Thus every individual has to live in harmony with his gods and the physical nature. One can see deification of physical nature in traditional African society. They worship plants, caves, animals, and rivers. This paper is an attempt to rediscover the Communal Ceremonies and Festivals of Igbo people which have kept them united and created solidarity among them. After knowing about these Communal Ceremonies and Festivals, one can say that the Igbo people were highly civilized but misrepresented by the Western literary imaginations.

### Keywords

*Abomination, Ikolo, iroko, Purification, Communal Festivals, Chief Priest, Cultural Solidarity, etc.*

### Full Article

The world of Umuaro is full of communal celebrations in honor of their chief deity, minor gods and to celebrate the New Year, harvesting and planting seasons. Ezeulu being the Chief priest of Umuaro performs the most important rituals. Through the medium of the public ceremonies, the readers understand the true powers of Ezeulu and the importance of his office as a Chief priest of six villages. He has the religious right to name the day for the *Pumpkin Leaves Feast* to be celebrated, and announces the day for *New Yam Festival* with which the harvest begins in Umuaro. All the festivals in Umuaro are the public celebrations and not private affairs. Moreover, any event of happiness in one's family is cause of the public celebration, such as birth, marriage, *Uri* etc. Even any event of sorrow or grief causes sorrow for the whole village and the village participates with the family such as death and funeral rites. Prof. Mathew quotes Prof. Lindfors and points to this kind of village solidarity which centers on the Chief Priest Ezeulu.

For Igbo [...] human independence is the greatest of all values and *Arrow of God* displays this social cohesion at the lineage, village and clan levels. The narrative centers upon the homestead of the chief priest, Ezeulu and his extended family in which marriage and parenthood are never private concerns (Lindfors, 133).

One of such communal concerns is the *Pumpkin Leaves Feast*. The festival cleanses the six villages off their sins and any kind of abomination. The people gather at their village ground *ilo* from morning. Men bring pots of palm wine. Those who can get first in the ground occupy the



shade of trees and drink wine with their friends, relative and in-laws. The women from the six villages wear their best cloths and wear ornaments of ivory. Every woman from Umuaro carries a bunch of pumpkin leaves in hands. Achebe presents the festival as a meeting place for the entire village and they greet their friends, in-laws and even the rivals or enemies ignoring their hostilities. That year's festival is very important because, "a stranger to this year's festival might go away thinking that Umuaro had never been more united in all its history." (Achebe, 67) The narrator very artistically captures the reader's attention to the great flow of villagers coming to *Nkwo*, the ground. He describes it as, "today it was as though all the bees in the world were passing overhead" (Achebe, 69). Then the great *Ikolo* drum sounds. The Igbo drum has its own myth as. "The *Ikolo* was fashioned in the olden days from a giant *iroko* tree at the very spot where it was felled. The *Ikolo* was as old as *Ulu* himself at whose order the tree was cut down and its trunk hollowed out into a drum" (Achebe, 70). The *Ikolo* is decorated with skulls won in the wars in the past. The drum calls all the six village deities and the villages in the ancient order and sometimes it also calls the important peoples from Umuaro by their names. All people from Umuaro and neighboring villages gather and they wait for Ezeulu. Then they hear the sound of '*ogene*' three times from *Ulu*'s shrine. Ezeulu's messengers clear the centre of ground and form a ring of people from where Ezeulu will enact the coming of *Ulu*, the *ogene* sounds again and the *Ikolo* begins to salute the Chief priest, the women weave the pumpkin leaves across their faces and pray to *Ulu*, 'the god that kills and saves.' As Ezeulu arises from his shrine and runs into the centre of ground, dances three or four steps and faces to *Ikolo* drum, 'speak on,' he said to it, 'Ezeulu hears what you say.' Ezeulu's appearance is very different from everyday,

He wore smoked raffia which descended from his waist to the knee. The left half of his body-from forehead to toes-was painted with white chalk. Around his head was a leather band from which an eagle's feather pointed backwards. On his right hand he carried *NneOfo*, the mother of all staffs of authority in Umuaro, and in his left he held a long iron staff which kept up a quivering rattle whenever he stuck its pointed end into the earth (Achebe, 71).

Then he comes to the centre of the ground and reenacts the first coming of *Ulu* and how each of the four days creates obstacles in his way. Later on he begins to run around the market place and visits every section of it. "The women waved their leaves around their heads and flung them at him. It was as though thousands and thousands of giant flying insects swarmed upon him" (Achebe, 73). As the chief priest appears to men, children and woman, they murmur their prayers to Ezeulu, through their prayers they request him to kill all the sin in their household and even in their minds. Ezeulu's younger wife prays for herself and her household as;

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 if it has come through my children or my friends or kinsfolk let it follow these leaves (Achebe, 73).

She waves a bunch of pumpkin leaves and flings them over Ezeulu. As Ezeulu completes his rituals, his six messengers randomly collect a bunch of Pumpkin Leaves from the ground and follow Ezeulu to his shrine. The *Ikolo* drum which does not pause during Ezeulu's rituals, stops and the people get relieved off from their mounting tension. The chief priest is in his shrine, "triumphant over the sins of Umuaro which he as now burying deep into the earth with the six





bunches of leaves” (Achebe, 73). In this way, the Ceremony of Purification ends with the burying of the sin of Umuaro in *Ulu*’s shrine. Through above description of the ceremony, Achebe takes his reader to visit the traditional ceremonies in Umuaro. He wants the readers to look through such public drama of celebration and witness the purity of purpose and unity of the villagers under a religious festival which is a very rhythm of their cultural life.

There is another communal celebration of the Festival of the New Year-the *New Yam Feast*. The six villages of Umuaro have agriculture as their main occupation and there are many rituals and festivals associated with the cultivation of land. They have their own agricultural calendar, and the year in it begins with the *New Yam Festival*. The festival initiates the harvesting season in Umuaro and on the other hand the *Pumpkin Leaves Festival* begins the planting season in that calendar. According to Igbo religion the Chief priest of *Ulu* announces the day for the Feast of New Yam, and this is his duty and religious right too. No one can dig a new yam from farm and eat before the feast in Umuaro, even if famine is there. But toward off hunger of a family, the family may dig up a few yams from their homestead farm and around their house but one cannot begin harvesting in the farm. The most important thing is that the titled men are not allowed to eat new yam from wherever it has been brought. All the six villages obey the ritual because in ancient times they came together to form Umuaro and *Ulu* and this is their debt to *Ulu* who saves them from any disaster and the threats from Abame. For this *New Yam Feast*, “every grown man in Umuaro took a good-sized seed-yam to the shrine of *Ulu* and placed it in the heap from his village after circling it around his head; then he took the lump of chalk lying beside the heap and marked his face”(Achebe, 202). Apart from religious aspect of the new yam feast there is a social aspect. The elders in the Umuaro by using these heaps of yams carried by each villager count the number of people in each village and can do census of Umuaro. “If there was an increase over the previous year a sacrifice of gratitude, was made to *Ulu*; but if the number had declined the reason was sought from diviners and a sacrifice of appeasement was ordered” (Achebe, 203). One can view this festival as a social implication to do census and a brilliant example of the African people’s civilization; very rich and ancient. The most important is Ezeulu selects thirteen yams from the heap and eats a yam on every new moon, when there is only one yam left, he announces the feast of New Yam and the Igbo agricultural calendar completes a year.

There is another importance of this festival. The six villages of Umuaro have their minor gods too, and this new yam feast, “was also the day for all the minor deities in the six villages who did not have their own special feasts” (Achebe, 203). The villagers bring all the minor deities at the shrine of *Ulu* and place in a line by their custodian on the feast day. Those men and women, who have been favored by these minor deities, offer sacrifices and presents to them. These deities have their once in a year public appearance and are carried out in market place by their custodian on their heads with dance and music. This festival shows immense potential for its social and religious cause because,

The festival thus brought gods and men together in one crowd. It was the only assembly in Umuaro in which a man might look to his right and find his neighbor and look to his left and see a god standing there-perhaps Agwu whose mother also gave birth to madness or Ngene, owner of a stream (Achebe, 203).

This mingling of spiritual world and human world in such festivals gives a structural unity and coherence to the novel. The readers of Achebe can observe the presence of deities in festivities and everyday life of Umuaro binds them with a single goal of solidarity of clan and African culture.



Besides these major festivals, the six villages have some other festivals and feasts and some of them are observed by single village. The village Umuagu celebrates *MgbaAgbgho* a wrestling of the Maidens. Umunneora observes the annual feast in honor of *Idemili*, the village deity and the owner of royal python. The six villages have a common celebration of a retreat called *Oso Nwanadi*, “to placate the resentful spirits of kinsmen killed in war or in other ways made to suffer death in the cause of Umuaro” (Achebe, 194).

The Idemili festival is also an occasion of joy for all the Umuaro and the nearby villages. All the people come to the village ground of Umunneora to see the great mask bedecked with mirrors and rich cloths of different colors. This mask is called *Ogalanya* or *Man of Riches*, and it belongs to Nwaka, the richest man in Umuaro. Nwaka wears the mask on this festival of *Idemili* and delivers a monologue in the language of the ancestral spirits. These are some major festivals and celebration in Umuaro which hold the community as whole and give power and inspiration to lead a religious, peaceful and traditional life. It can be stated that the novels of Achebe are deeply rooted in the African culture. Prof. Khayyoom rightly observes that, “Achebe like the twentieth century African author is a cultural entrepreneur and his novels are a part of cultural exploration aiming to rediscover the African past” (Achebe, 46). Besides the religious celebrations, *AkwuNro* is function of masquerades. The young boys’ in Umuaro carve new ancestral masks and present them in this function. They prepare these ancestral masks in a secret place to keep mystery of ancestral spirit. The Umuachala ground has four *okwolo* houses at four corners from where the masks are initiated. The *ogene* begins to blow and the whole village empties itself in the ground. The first mask appears is an *Agba*-it stands for the power and aggressiveness of youth and the crowd scatters in real or half-real terror. The mask dances through the *ilo* and proceeds to the *okolo* hut to salute the village elders.

“Ezeulu de-de-de-de-de,” it said,  
 “Our father, my hand is on the ground,” replied the chief priest.  
 “Ezeulu, do you know me?”  
 “How can a man know you who are beyond human knowledge?”  
 “Ezeulu, our Masks salutes you,” it sang.  
 “eje-ya-mma-mma-mma-mma-mmamama-eje-ya-mma!” sang its followers.  
 “ora-obado. A aba salutes you!” (Achebe, 199-200)

Above religious ritual, a kind of public drama is the very breath of Igbo religion. The ancestral masks represent their ancestors at the earth and this mingling of dead and alive is the basic principle of African religion and culture. Gareth Griffiths explains the dialogue between the Mask and the chief priest. “The fact that this exchange is formalized and that the words of the priest and the Mask are ritualized and traditional bound in a continuity of question and response, reinforces its function in the novel” (Gareth, 24).

Achebe has created his community’s cultural past through portraying realistic picture of the life really lived by his people before the arrival of colonial and Christian forces in the continent. This is how Achebe recreates the cultural past of his Igbo society and presents the traditional wisdom of African people. He has tried to reestablish their dignity which is lost by the disaster of colonialism and European’s false representations of it.

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