



IGBO MYTHS AND LIFE IN ARROW OF GOD

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Abstract

African people are proud of its rich cultural heritage and mythology which are as rich and ancient as any civilization in the world. The Africans have their own religion and they consider it as a way of life, the basis of African culture as well as morality. It guides and controls their lives too. African people believe in polytheistic worship. They worship plants, caves, animals, rivers, and sea. The Igbo people in Nigeria worship silk cotton tree and a python. They consult the Oracle of Hills and the Caves. The present research paper as an academic research is an attempt to search and analyze various myths and its importance for the Igbo people as presented by Chinua Achebe in his novel *Arrow of God*.

Keywords

Royal Python, Mythology, Pumpkin Leaves Festival, Ulu, Igbo Community, etc.

Full Article

Achebe uses different kinds of African myths in his narration not only to review African culture but also to give structural unity to his stories and to convey the religious and social wisdom of his community. Achebe does not invent these myths but they are inherited from generation to generation for the purpose of younger generation's education and to impart the cultural values and wisdom. Every society in the world has its own myths and myths carry its culture and explicit in concise form the traditional logic of things and some kind of moral attachment to it. Myths, symbols, folktales, proverbs and sayings are formed by the collective wisdom of many generations and hence have cultural importance. Achebe's use of different myths helps the readers to have an insight into the past of Igbo community. He does not use the Igbo myths only as a writing style but they also inspire his writing and dealing with the socio-cultural life of his people really lived in the past.

Achebe's third novel *Arrow of God* though published after *No Longer at Ease* captures the life of Umuaro in 1920s where as *No Longer at Ease* represents the time of 1950s proceeding to independence of Nigeria in 1960. The novel fills the gap between *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* through continuation of the Igbo world view of Umuaro. The Igbo culture which the readers have visited in Umuofia again they are in the same communal and religious world of Igbo clan in *Arrow of God*. The novel is a rich dramatization of traditional Igbo value centered on the chief God, *Ulu* of Umuaro. Achebe graphically paints the glory of Igbo culture through myths, religion, communal celebrations, and family and village structure and through music, dance and masks. All the cultural and religious aspirations of the Igbo people in Umuaro are attached to the chief God and its chief priest, who holds them together and guides their cultural, religious, political, and agricultural life.

Achebe employs some important myths in *Arrow of God* to convey the Igbo ethos in brief and to give historical dimension to his story. The first myth is about *Ani-Mmo*- the world where all the ancestors and dead fathers of Igbo community live. They watch over Umuaro from *Ani-Mmo* guide and control life of their successors on the earth. Igbo people celebrate festival of *Akwu Nro*



in which the widows in Umuachala village prepare *foo-foo* and palm nut soup for their dead husbands and put that food in front of their hut in the night of *Akwu Nro*. In the next morning, they find the empty pots of food and consider that the food is eaten by their dead husbands.

Ezeulu warns his people over the land dispute between Umuaro and Okperi that the disputed land belongs to Okperi and they must not choose war with Okperi. But the people do not care for Ezeulu's warning and fight with Okperi. Ezeulu convinces them that they should not fight an unjust war and the *Ulu* will not fight for them. The people of Umuaro neglect the traditional ways of justification. Ezeulu reacts, "the dead father of Umuaro looking at the world from Ani-Mmo must be utterly bewildered by the ways of the new age" (Achebe, 14). The dead fathers of Umuaro have their own world different from Umuaro, from where they can look at their village and can see how their descendents behave.

Ezeulu wonders at the decision of Umuaro to fight the unjust war, it means they are not obeying their village deity, which is the unquestionable guide to their life. It is clear to Ezeulu that they have become so wise that they are challenging even their personal God. Achebe here uses another myth of the formation of the village Umuaro and their chief deity, against which they are going to fight the war. It will be appropriate to cite the myth as it concerns the two major things in the novel the Umuaro and its chief deity. Ezeulu narrates,

-in the very distant past, when lizards were still few and far between, the six villages-Umuachala, Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezeani, Umuogwugwu and Umuisiuzo-lived as different people, and each worshiped its own deity. Then the hired soldiers of Abame used to strike in the dead of night, set fire to the houses and carry men and children into slavery. Things were so bad for the six villages that their leaders come together to save themselves. They hired a strong team of medicine-men to install a common deity for them. This deity which the father of the six villages made was called *Ulu*. Half of the medicine was buried at a place which becomes Nkwo market and the other half thrown into the stream which became Mili Ulu. The six villages then took the name of Umuaro, and the priests of Ulu become their Chief Priest. From that day they were never again beaten by an enemy. (Achebe, 14)

The myth explains the purpose behind the creation of *Ulu* and Umuaro and Umuaro takes the decision against its own purpose to fight '*the war of blame*'. Through this myth, Achebe communicates the purpose and wisdom of the fathers of the six villages to defend and take care of their community. Prof. Khayyoom makes clear the symbolic meaning behind the creation of *Ulu*, "Ulu symbolizes the spirit of political cohesiveness combating with external forces to safeguard the freedom of and integrity of the clan" (Khayyoom, 79). The myth also explains the political consciousness of the ancestors of Umuaro and the power of religion behind this consciousness. The myth gives historical importance to the creation of Umuaro and *Ulu* and wins the readers' credibility. Achebe also wants to show the reader that the village Umuaro has its own rich past.

Furthermore, Moses Unachuk, the first Christian convert in Umuaro narrates a mythical story of the tradition about Royal Python in Umuaro. The royal python is sacred to their religion and someone who kills it, will be definitely punished by the deity. According to Moses, "today there are six villages in Umuaro; but this has not always been the case. Our fathers tell us that they were seven before, and the seventh was called Umuama" (Achebe, 48). He continues that the six brothers from the village, Umuama killed a royal python and cooked it with yam pottage. But a quarrel began among the brother about cooking and eating the meal in equal and the quarrel spread



through Umuama and the whole village was wiped out in that quarrel. They thought that the deity punished the whole village for killing the royal python. The myth of killing of royal python clarifies the traditions of Umuaro towards the animal.

Lewis Nkosi comments on the use of myths in the novel and their purpose. “Arrow of God a whole cycle of people’s history is sketched out, filled in, reexamined, paraphrased, mythologized, compressing, centuries into the space of a single novel” (Nkosi, 31). Achebe uses a series of mythology to deal with the African past and its better understanding.

With these myths Achebe uses the greatest myth in *Arrow of God*, the myth of the first coming of *Ulu*. This performance illustrates one of the major religious duties of Ezeulu. The whole Umuaro is gathered at the *Nkwo* market place for the *Pumpkin Leaves Festival*. Ezeulu emerges from the *Ulu*’s shrine and stands in the centre place of the market and reenacts the myth of the first coming of *Ulu* and how the four days in the Igbo week create obstacles in *Ulu*’s way. It is necessary to cite the full myth for a thorough comprehension of the religious and cultural aspects associated with it. Ezeulu reenacts:

“At that time, when lizards were still in ones and twos the whole people assembled and chose me to carry their new deity. I said to them:

“Who am I to carry this fire on my bare head? A man who knows that his anus is small does not swallow an udala seed.”

“They said to me:

“Fear not. The man who sends a child to catch a shrew will also give him water to wash his hand.”

“I said ‘so be it.’

“And we set to work. That day was Eke: we worked into Oye and then into Afo. As day broke on Nkwo and the sun carried its sacrifice I carried my Alusi and, with all the people behind me, set out on that journey. A man sang with the flute on my right and another replied on my left. From behind the heavy tread of all the people gave me strength. And then all of a sudden something spread itself across my face. On one side it was raining, in the other side it was dry. I looked again and saw that it was Eke.

“I said to him: ‘is it you, Eke?’

“He replied: ‘it is I, Eke, the One that makes a strong man bite the earth with his teeth.’

“I took a hen’s egg and gave him. He took it and ate and gave way to me. We went on, past streams and forests. Then a smoking thicket crossed my path, and two men were wrestling on their heads. My followers looked one and took to their heels. I looked again and saw that it was Oye- (Achebe, 71)

This mythical account of the first coming of *Ulu* creates strange feelings in the hearts of Umuaro. It reflects the power of Igbo religion and the power of its chief priest too. The dramatic representation of *Ulu*’s journey is an integral part of Igbo culture. Achebe consciously uses this trait to achieve a deep impact on the readers mind and to make them aware about the existence of the African values and belief in such African myths. African mythology has many gods with specific function or duty. They believe in *Eru*, the god of wealth, Ezeulu’s second son Obika sees the spirit of *Eru*, and he describes the appearance of it, “taller than any man I know, He swallowed a lump, his skin was very light-he was dressed like a wealthy man. He had an eagle’s feather in his



red cap-He carried a big tusk across his shoulder” (Achebe, 08). Ezeulu, after Obika’s account says that it is the magnificent *Eru*, who finds his favor, gets wealth. The *Eru* harms only those people who swear falsely before his shrine otherwise not. There is another myth about Gods in Umuaro. According to Ezeulu the people of Okperi not only gave their land but their Gods too. They said, “We give you our Udo and our Ogwugwu; but you must call the deity we give you not Udo but son of Udo and not Ogwugwu but the son of Ogwugwu” (Achebe, 15). With this example, Achebe points out the helping nature of Igbo society in difficulty. The Okperi people not only give a piece of land to live but also their Gods to worship. Those were the African people who not only welcomed the strangers of Umuaro but helped them to settle down both socially and spiritually. But the European people have misrepresented the nature of African people. In this case Franz Fanon observes that, “The native is declared insensible to the ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values and his is in this sense absolute evil” (Fanon, 32)

Achebe challenges these kinds of misrepresentations by recreating various myths drawn from the traditional memory through his novels. Achebe mentions that he has heard these myths from his grandmother. Achebe’s *Arrow of God* presents the everyday life of African people and he neither idealizes Igbo society nor superficially rediscovers it, though nothing escapes from his microscopic observation. Through these novels he generates a literary world of Igbo society, the world which truly existed before colonization of African continent.

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