



THE RELIGIOUS DUTIES OF A PRIEST AND IGBO RITUALS: A STUDY

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Abstract

This research paper entitles as The Religious Duties of a Priest and Igbo Rituals is an attempt to analyze Chinua Achebe's representation of the tradition life of Igbo people in Nigeria. The novel Arrow of God has a number of cultural and religious rituals, festivals, and celebrations representing the way of life of the Igbo community. The Igbo community has unique religion full of rituals, worship and ceremonies. The religious rituals in the novel are not only traditional aspects of their life but very breathing of communal solidarity of Igbo community. Chinua Achebe consciously explains in details the religious rituals because he has to put forward that the African People has rich cultural, religious, and communal heritage. The religious rituals of Igbo community may be mere functions or superstitions for the western world but they are the representations of Igbo religion, beliefs, and authentic cultural history of Igbo people.

Keywords

Igbo, Colonialism, Dehumanization, Christianity, Communal Solidarity, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

A priest, among Igbo people, is considered a torch bearer for the community. Achebe gives full rights to Ezeulu to perform the religious rituals on behalf of the entire people in the six villages in Umuaro. In *Arrow of God*, he performs two very important religious functions; first is his performance in the *Pumpkin Leaves Festival* and second is to announce the day for *New Yam Feast*. The six villages of Umuaro come together and form their common deity, *Ulu* and they also select the priest of *Ulu*, Ezeulu is selected as a religious leader. Achebe begins the novel with the religious atmosphere. The chief Priest searches the new moon in the sky from his hut because he has to perform one of his religious duties by eating one yam from the thirteen sacred yams at every new moon. When he sees the new moon, he takes his *ogane* and blows it, "Gome Gome Gome Gome-and immediately children's voices took up the news on all sides. *Onwaatuo!... onwaatuo!... onwaatuo!...*" (Achebe, AOG, 02). The *ogene* is a metal instrument of music to announce the appearance of the moon. After announcing the new moon, he ritually eats the yam and prays in front of the household shrine:

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 machete 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, 06).

The Igbo religious leader is expected to pray for the whole clan and the above prayer of Ezeulu is an example of it. Ezeulu's half body is painted with white chalk thus his is half black and half white. Achebe here focuses on the duties of a priest to pray and to be in constant contact with the deity for the safety and progress of his people. This traditional priest is very loyal and caring towards his people and the deity. He never takes his supper before the Umuaro went to sleep safe and sound. Once his senior wife Matefi sends his supper early in the evening, Ezeulu becomes furious and shouts on her, "I don't know how many times I have said in this house that I shall not eat my supper when every other man in Umuaro is retiring to sleep" (Achebe, 09). The incident illustrates Ezeulu's concern for his people.

Ezeulu, being the supreme leader and holding the ancestral office, is able to control his clan. He can use his position for his personal gains but he is not such kind of man. He has wisdom of his culture and power of the religion. He knows how to use the power for the sake of his kinsmen. Though *Arrow of God* is a sequel to *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeulu is equal with Okonkwo, the hero of Umuofia. Both are physically strong but there is a great difference between Ezeulu and Okonkwo. Okonkwo's fame and prestige rest on his physical power and his ability of fighting wars. Contrary to Okonkwo, Ezeulu has a sharp mind, wisdom and the most important he accepts change. Ezeulu is intelligent and able to see future and prepare himself and his people for it. In the time of *Arrow of God* the British colonial forces were settled down very well and they were running their missionary schools in Umuaro. Ezeulu instead of attacking Christianity blindly, he thinks of the missionary education is useful. Prof. Jaya Laxmi Rao observes this trait in Ezeulu and says,

A man like Ezeulu knows that it is this knowledge and this wisdom, which have given the white man, power over lesser mortals, lesser because they lack his intelligence to gain material prosperity. And it is only gaining worldly knowledge that a society can hope to achieve the higher goal of spiritual truth (Achebe, 49).

Ezeulu accepts the positive changes from the colonial missionary education in Umuaro. Ezeulu has immense religious power, therefore one cannot challenge his authority but he never uses his power for false practices. He never tells lie even when it comes to go against his own people. Achebe bestows his priest with virtue of truth along with his religious duties. Ezeulu has to take care of the safety of his village not only in case of rage of any God but also in the social and political aspects of the village. The formation of Umuaro and the deity is based on the safety of the six villages from religious forces and the threats from neighboring village. The people of Umuaro, like the people of Umuofia, hold meetings at market place to discuss the crucial issues about their personal and communal life. It is their age old tradition to take a communal decision. Achebe creates a land dispute between Umuaro and their neighbor, Okperi over a piece of land. In the assembly meeting to decide the land dispute Ezeulu speaks truth that creates enmity between him and his people. Ezeulu knows that the disputed land is of Okperi people. But Umuaro refuses the fact and ready to fight a war against Okperi. On which Ezeulu advises them,

He told the men of Umuaro that Ulu would not fight an unjust war. "I know," he told them, "my father said this to me that when our village first came here to live the land belonged to Okperi. It was Okperi who gave a piece of their land to live in. They also gave us their deities-their Udo and their Ogwugwu-if



you choose to fight a man for a piece of farm land that belongs to him I shall have no hand in it (Achebe, AOG, 15).

This firm decision of Ezeulu causes a stir in Umuaro and increases their hostility to him. Ezeulu having responsibilities of his office ought not to take side of Umuaro in the war. Ezeulu is a sincere follower of the rules laid down by Igbo religion to keep integrity in his clan. One can trust him and his duties because people say '*this is a man*' a concept in Igbo society. Achebe explains the concept as, "A person who has been leading a right stands by his word. He can take care of his responsibilities, familial economic as well as social and political. This is a measure of success both material and spiritual" (Rao, 52). This is the man, who is aware of his powers and stands against his own people, for the principle of truth that *Ulu* will not fight the war of blame. Captain Winterbottom, the District Officer witnesses this judgment of Ezeulu against his own clan and admires him. Once he asks Ezeulu to send one of his sons to mission school. Ezeulu is a visionary man. He knows the wisdom of White man, so he sends his son Oduche to Church with different purpose. Because he can guess the future and the knowledge Oduche will have at Church may be useful for the safety of his people. He convinces Oduche to join the school,

The world is changing." He had told him. "I do not like it. But I am like the bird Eneke-nti-oba. When his friends asked him why he was always on the wings he replied: 'men of today have learnt to shot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching.' I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do no befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known* tomorrow (Achebe, AOG, 46).

Ezeulu has this kind of traditional Igbo wisdom and he guides his son Oduche like a seasoned politician. Achebe in an interview comments on Ezeulu,

He is an intelligent man and can see what is about to happen. He sees that changes are inevitable and he tries to master the new forces, to use the new forces in order to retain his own position and to manage the inevitable changes in his society (Fabre, 5).

In this way, Ezeulu has all kind of traits of a hero an African hero because his character is fully based and developed on the religious and cultural aspects of Igbo society. Throughout the novel, he acts as an embodiment of African culture and the upholder of it. He not only obeys his religion but makes his people to hold their culture and tradition.

Though Ezeulu falls and meets with his tragedy, this kind of fall also has cultural meaning in Igbo culture. Achebe defends Ezeulu's fall as:

Ezeulu was struggling with the white man and his return we could hope, would compensate for his struggle. But his people, turned against him, and so the white man had it all his way. I was not saying, of course that the white man is therefore right what I am saying is that, in such kind of extreme situation, the important thing was that Ezeulu was able to fight and to cope, as best as he could, with the circumstances. Even when he failed, he failed as a man, you see. That is very important in our culture. The recent experiences we had, in Nigeria, of the civil war, had this exemplified. There were leaders, who showed up complete cowards and other, a few of whom people could say, 'this is a man.'



When you talk about somebody and say, ‘He is a man; that means much in my culture-That itself is a story; not just how do you deal with it, but-if this is the case-how do you fail. In part, it is the story of Ezeulu. The way you fail is terribly important (Achebe, 07).

The defensive statement of Achebe on Ezeulu’s fall is very important because his fall is according to Igbo culture. Through the character of Ezeulu, Achebe constructs his concept of Igbo hero and character, Ezeulu does not succumb to the situations which are created by colonial administration and Christianity but holds his culture and accepts fall. Through the novel, Ezeulu tries to be true to the Igbo culture and even when it comes to his own people. Ezeulu fails to cope with the complex structure of Umuaro both political and religious, till the end and adhere to his past though it is disturbed by the colonial forces; administration and Christianity. This is the right Igbo past with which Achebe wants the reader to be familiar. Ezeulu acts as an arrow in the bow of his god *Ulu* and he stands for the role assigned to him by his religion, culture, and the titled men and by the writer.

Hospitality is one of the main rituals in Igbo culture. The people of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* and also the people of Umuaro in *Arrow of God* welcome their guests by offering Kola nut and they fix the binding between the host and the guest by drawing some line on the floor and painting a toe with the white chalk. A reader can come across so many examples of breaking kola nut in honor of guest in Achebe’s novels. There is an example of kola nut ritual. The in-laws of Ezeulu’s daughter to take her back to their home, Ezeulu welcomes them and asks his elder son to bring some kola nut, and he takes the little wooden bowl containing a lump of white clay, and offers to the in-laws;

Here is a piece of *nzu*,” he said as he rolled the chalk towards his guest, who picked it up and drew on the floor between his legs three erect lines and a forth laying down under them. Then he painted one of his big toes and rolled the chalk back to Ezeulu (Achebe, AOG, 62).

Kola nut and white clay are the signs of their hospitality and the host prays for both the person’s family and their clan’s welfare while breaking and eating the kola nut. This kola ritual reflects the hospitality culture of Igbo society. In the prayer, they mostly pray about health, life and security of their kinsmen to the god. The famous novelist Wole Soyinka advocates that, “It is common place knowledge that hospitality is one of the treasured laws of African social existence” (Soyinka, 113).

It can be noted that the kola nut is offered to every guest, relatives and the frequent visitors even friends too. Another important thing about this ritual is they do not recite the same prayer. They pray according to the purpose of the visitor’s visit the current situation especially when unhappy, they pray to solve the problem. Ezeulu offers the white clay to Akuebue and prays while breaking the kola nut,

Okbuefi Akuebue, may you live, and all your people. I too will live with all my people. But life alone is not enough. May we have the things with which to live it well. For there is a kind of slow and weary life which is worse than death-May god confront the man on the top and the man below-But let him who is jealous of another’s position choke with his envy-May good come to the land of Igbo (Achebe, AOG, 95).

In the prayer, Ezeulu asks good situations for his friend, for himself and curses his opponents. Nwaka is another titled and rich man who feels jealous about Ezeulu’s position as chief priest and creates difficulties for Ezeulu. Ezeulu prays to cope with the difficulties. In this way, the kola nut ritual has the hospitality principle in Igbo society.



One of the most important religious rituals is the second burial and funeral feast, which must be observed on second or third day of the death. In the traditional village of Umuaro there is a great religious masquerade in the second burial night. Someone should hold the *Ogbazulobodo*, the night spirit and perform the rites of funeral feast. Obika is the only man in Umuaro who can perform this rite perfectly. Ogbuefi Amalu can have his second burial after four moons from his death because of famine in Umuaro. According to the Igbo religion the dead man cannot enter in the world of ancestors without second burial and funeral feast, he remains wandering in the rain and sun which is a suffering to his soul. Ogbuefi Amalu, before his death, says his son Aneto that he must not delay the second burial and funeral feast beyond four moons from his death and to slaughter a bull. The sacrifice is also offered to dead father at this rite. Prof. Jaya Laxmi Rao observes the ritual of night spirit and its importance as,

The essence of Umuaro's culture finds expression at its material and spiritual levels in Obika's enactment of *Ogbazulobodo*, the night spirit that cleanses the land on the eve of a dead man's second burial, without which the ritual remains incomplete and the departed spirit unappeased (Rao, 72).

Obika's enactment of *Ogbazulobodo* is the absolute merging of man and the celestial spirit. He runs throughout the *ilo* wearing the spirit with the speed of a deer. Though Obika suffering from fever mingles with the spirit and his deer like ritual running in the *ilo* causes his death at the end of ceremony. In a symbolic sense Obika sacrifices himself for the sake of his rituals and the Igbo religion.

Conclusion:

To conclude, through the medium of Igbo rituals Chinua Achebe has discussed traditional life of African people in general and of Nigerian people in particular and found expression as a return to the African past, which was almost wiped out by two important historical events; the slave trade and colonialism in Africa. Many African writers have attempted to rediscover the simplicity and actuality of the traditional way of life. The above rituals in the novel are the cultural and religious activities which kept the community traditional and united.

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