

The Language of Political Myth in Achebe's *Arrow of God*

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Abstract: In this study, we discuss the theme of myth diffusion. Elsewhere, some of our colleagues dealt with the need for a political myth for the various countries in Africa. An effective political myth must be a slogan for all the people. The story must be told and retold by various members of the society so that it becomes a potent force for the whole community. It is our contention that Achebe's *Arrow of God* demonstrates this trend which is called myth diffusion by some political theorists. The profuse use of proverbs and symbols in the novel are a means of myth diffusion because the blueprint for the proverbs and symbols is the myth of the state. Finally, the study recommends that not only should myths of state be created for our countries, the story and the language of the political myth should be so diffused that they become a slogan.

Keywords: Myth diffusion, myth of the state, proverbs, symbols

INTRODUCTION

One way in which Achebe's *Arrow of God* can be read is through myth criticism. Elsewhere, it has been shown that the novel demonstrates the breakdown of one political myth and how it is seamlessly replaced by another. When the second myth also fails because of political in-fighting, the leaders cannot act in concert and a new myth championed by the emerging Christian group supplants the old one. It is observed that if political leaders in Africa do not act to replace the post-independence politically legitimatising myth of the common-nation-state or nation-building, at best, the nations of Africa would deconstruct into primordial tribal enclaves, or at worst, violent and anarchist fringe groups would construct new myths of the state for the various countries. Myth theory suggests that successful myths 'need to be told and re-told in an organic fashion seamlessly becoming political discourse in a political community.' This is what theorists call myth diffusion (Sala, 2010). In this study, we discuss how Achebe diffuses the language of the political myth throughout the state in the novel *Arrow of God* by using proverbs and symbols as the vectors.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In 1946, the German philosopher Cassirer (1946) propounded the theory of the myth of the state in which he clearly explained that every great culture was based on myth. Since Cassirer put forth the theory, there have been many interesting papers and discussions about the myth of the state or the political myth but it seems the

consensus is that man's 'primeval stupidity' would always ensure that our nation states would be based not on rationality but on myth. In cross reference to Blumenberg, Meyer and Rowan, Sala explains that 'every form of social organization requires narratives to give it meaning and to provide a reason for being' (Sala, 2010). Sala also contends: 'Political authority is no different and has a narrative that frames who should govern, why, how and over whom' (Sala, 2010). The European Union, touted as a super state has been shown to be founded on myth. The *Journal of Common Market Studies* has devoted one special issue, Vol 48 (1)2010 'to explore the role of political myths in creating normative and cognitive foundations for governing in the EU'. Jones (2010) acknowledges that the European Commission website has a page called 'Euromyths', an official acknowledgement that the European Union has a mythical basis. Sala demonstrates that the European Union has its basis in myth. Jones also deals with the economic myths that surround the process of European integration even though he finds them dysfunctional and need to be replaced. Lenschow and Sprungk (2010) observe that a new myth of 'a Green Europe' is emerging. Sala concludes that 'it is not just that Europe needs to find a new story or a better way to tell it; rather, it needs to find ways for myth making about Europe to become part of political discourse' (Sala, 2010) He further explains that:

The telling and retelling of the story constitutes important acts that confirm belonging and participation in the polity connecting individuals to those who govern. Identifying who tells the stories,

how and why the stories survive and whether they are accepted may give us an indication of the extent to which there is a widely diffused consensus on a form of political rule (Sala, 2010: 2).

In this study we wish to demonstrate how Achebe makes the myth of Ulu a part of the political discourse of Umuaro. Indeed, we go further to show that the very symbols and proverbs of the political myth are also diffused in the community.

In *Arrow of God*, the story of Ulu is accepted by all the people of Umuaro and told and retold many times by different people. Nwaka, the opposition leader and Ezeulu's arch-enemy, accepts that Ulu 'is still our protector, even though we no longer fear Abam warriors at night' (Achebe, 1974). Throughout the story, the idea of Ulu as killer and saviour is expressed many times by many people. The myth is narrated twice every year by the Chief Priest during two festivals at crucial periods in the life of the community: just before planting and just before harvesting. The myth has also been worked into the structure of the novel as a charter, a refrain which is repeated many times at emotionally climactic moments in the story to excuse action or inaction. The Chief Priest cites the myth during the debate on the land dispute with Okperi to show why the people should not fight 'a war of blame' with Okperi. He also justifies sending his son to the colonial school by referring to the myth. On two other occasions, Ezeulu reminds himself of his responsibility as victim as expressed in the myth. Through these techniques of iteration and saturation, the myth is diffused through Umuaro and readers are not allowed to forget the Umuaro myth of origin.

Myth diffusion in *Arrow of God*: The hub around which *Arrow of God* turns is the myth of Ulu. This myth of the state of Umuaro is a composite: the story or the history of Ulu (p: 14) and the Chief Priest's encounter with the four days of the Igbo week narrated in the myth of the First Coming of Ulu (pp: 70-71). In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (1958) describes proverbs as 'the palm oil with which words are eaten'. In *Arrow of God*, proverbs help the community to diffuse the political myth which binds them together. The myth of the First Coming of Ulu provides a blueprint for the use of proverbs in the novel. There are three proverbs in that myth. The first one expresses Ezeulu's first reluctance and diffidence to carry the new deity. He complains: "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." (Achebe, 1974)

In the proverb, the 'man' is the priest; he has a small anus because he thinks he does not have the power 'in his body to carry such potent danger' (p: 189) which, according to him, is like carrying fire on his bare head. The 'udala seed' which when swallowed might

create problems during bowel evacuation is the deity. This is the priest's realistic appraisal of himself.

The response of the people is expressed in the second proverb: "Fear not. The man who sends a child to catch a shrew will also give him water to wash his hand." (Achebe, 1974)

The 'man' here is the community and the 'child' they send is the Chief Priest; the 'shrew' is the deity and the water they 'give him ... to wash his hand' is their support. This proverb is about the responsibility of the people to the Chief Priest.

The third proverb is quite an interesting one: "It is I, Oye, the One that began cooking before another and properly punctuated so that the full stop after the brackets is placed in front of pots as in "so has more " broken pots." (Achebe, 1974).

It is normally true that the one who began cooking first ends up having more broken pots and thus older people must have the preeminence. In the story, however, Ulu, a god who appears much later than other gods is given preeminence to the chagrin of the priests of the older gods, especially Ezidemili, the priest of Idemili. Due to the destabilizing nature of this grudge, the older deities (in our view) put their complaint about being supplanted in the mouth of Oye the second day. The Chief Priest's apology and gesture of reconciliation and its acceptance are captured in the next two sentences of the myth: 'I took a white cock and gave him. He took it and made way for me.' The priest thus takes responsibility for dislocations which his god's coming has created and makes amends.

It is therefore not surprising that majority of the proverbs in the story are properly punctuated so that it reads as "... about self-appraisal, realistic and unrealistic, and responsibility. Early in the novel, Ezeulu considers 'the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the people'. In a long interior monologue, the Chief Priest considers the fact that if he should refuse to name the day of the two main festivals there would be no planting and no reaping. Then the reality dawns on him:

He was merely a watchman. His power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his. As long as the goat was alive it could be his; he would find it food and take care of it. But the day it was slaughtered he would know soon enough who the real owner was (Achebe, 1974: 3).

Immediately after this realistic self-appraisal of his authority, he exclaims to himself: 'No! the Chief Priest of Ulu was more than that, must be more than that.' Actually, the Chief Priest was not more than the child in the proverb but Ezeulu wishes he was. Ezeulu's 'surrender to the irrational' begins from here. Later in the same interior monologue, he asks himself:

What kind of power was it if it would never be used? Better to say that it was not there, that it was no more than the power in the anus of the proud

dog who sought to put out a furnace with his puny fart. ... (Achebe, 1974: 4).

Again, the proverb is a realistic portrayal of the power of the Chief Priest. His power 'was no more than power in the anus of the proud dog' whose fart could have absolutely no effect on the furnace. The pause at the end of the extract is ominous, for it is a pause of anticipation, of resolve.

There are many other examples of realistic self-appraisal in the novel. The divine drummer of the Ikolo in answer to an admirer says: 'An old woman is never too old when it comes to the dance she knows', a realistic appraisal of his skill (Achebe, 1974). When one woman attempts to restrain Ojiugo, Matefi's daughter, during her fight with her brother, Oduche and is bitten by the girl, she remarks, 'The offspring of a hawk cannot fail to devour chicks. This one resembles her mother in stubbornness' (Achebe, 1974). This is a realistic assessment of the aggressive first wife of Ezeulu. A similar proverb is given by Akuebue, Ezeulu's friend, about the bad behaviour of his daughter, Udenkwo, who he thinks takes after her mother, his wife and who will definitely pass it on to her children. The proverb is, 'When mother-cow is cropping grass her calves watch her mouth' (Achebe, 1974).

'Allow him (a leper) a handshake and he wants an embrace' (p: 42) is Ezeulu's appraisal of the new religion. He is thinking of its influence on his son Oduche for he 'was becoming more strange every day'. Nwaka agrees: 'Did not our elders tell us that as soon as we shake hands with a leper he will want an embrace?' (Achebe, 1974). He is rebuking Ezeulu, the Chief Priest for his friendship with the white man, a friendship which has resulted in the white man inviting Ezeulu to visit him.

The string of proverbs uttered by the *Ogbazulobodo* is generally those of realistic or false appraisal of the self. A few examples will suffice here:

The fly that struts round on a mound of excrement wastes his time; the mound will always be greater than the fly. He who builds a homestead before another can boast more broken pots. Bat said he knew his ugliness and chose to fly by night. An ill-fated man drinks water and it catches in his teeth. The fly that has no one to advise him follows the corpse into the ground (Achebe, 1974: 226-227).

Then there are many proverbs about responsibility in *Arrow of God*. Ezeulu cites the proverb 'When an adult is in the house, the she-goat is not left to suffer the pains of parturition on its tether' twice (Achebe, 1974). He was talking to an elder, Egonnwane and all elders who he thinks 'left what they should have done and did another' (p.26). Egonnwane, the elder himself, had said earlier: 'But I am an old man and an old man is there to

talk. If the lizard of the homestead should neglect to do the things for which its kind is known, it will be mistaken for the lizard of the farmland' (Achebe, 1974).

Ezeulu expresses this responsibility in another way when he is talking to the son he sends to the white man's school, giving reasons why the child must go there. The three proverbs he uses place responsibility on people:

The world is changing. 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 wing he replied: "Men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching." ... The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place. (p. 46). My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had we known tomorrow (Achebe, 1974: 45-46).

The first proverb counsels that a man like the bird must act according to the dictates of the times. Later, Ezeulu adds a third proverb which emphasizes this: 'A man must dance the dance prevalent in his time' (p: 189) The second proverb is about a mask dancing which is a very traditional event and we all know how conservative tradition is, but the dancer keeps shifting and the spectator needs to change his position often to see it well and this shows transformation. With that proverb, Ezeulu expresses both cultural continuity and the fear that change may become inevitable. In the Preface to the Second Edition of *Arrow of God*, Achebe himself notes this: 'Perhaps changes are rarely called for or justified and yet we keep making them'. Ezeulu thus justifies an action which his people consider as the religious treachery of a man who should be an example in upholding tradition but who infringes it, through the traditional linguistic tool: proverbs. The proverbs in the last three paragraphs are about the responsibility of a person either to himself or to his community.

A man must suffer the consequences of his actions, one of the themes of *Arrow of God* is also expressed with proverbs. First Ezeulu (p: 59) accepting responsibility for Oduche's action and then Nwaka (p: 144) blaming Ezeulu for his association with the white man observes through the wisdom of the elders expressed in the proverb: 'A man who brings home ant-infested faggots should not complain if he is visited by lizards.' On the same topic, Nwaka tells Ezeulu: 'You tied the knot; you should know how to undo it. You passed the shit that is smelling; you should carry it away' (p: 144).

Getting to the end of the story, Ezeulu expresses his incomprehension at what he takes to be his god's treachery and abandonment with a string of rhetorical questions. The string of proverbs that follows about his god's refusal to carry out his responsibility towards his loyal worshippers is also couched in the same style:

When was it ever heard that a child was scalded by the piece of yam its own mother put in its palm? What man would send his son with a potsherd to bring fire from a neighbor's hut and then unleash rain on him? Who ever sent his son up the palm to gather nuts and then took an axe and felled the tree? But today such a thing had happened before the eyes of all. What could it point to but the collapse and ruin of all things? Then a god, finding him powerless, might take flight and in one final, backward glance at his abandoned worshippers cry: If the rat cannot flee fast enough

Let him make way for the tortoise (Achebe, 1974: 229).

Ezeulu, the loyal worshipper is the rat while the god Ulu is the tortoise. The normal situation is that the tortoise, that is the god, who is slower and better protected, should be the rear guard protecting the people. Here, there is the abnormal situation of the tortoise overtaking the fleet-footed and cowardly rat. 'The collapse and ruin of all things' is no hyperbole. Everything including the tried and tested wisdom of the ancestors embodied in the language of proverbs seems to have failed.

As if to demonstrate this failure further, John Nwodika, a character in the novel uses proverbs, the wisdom of the elders, not only to reject practices handed down by the ancients, but also as a charter, an excuse to justify this behavior. The first is 'A man of sense does not go on hunting little bush rodents when his age mates are after big game' (p: 169) The 'little bush rodents' refers to the traditional dances John was involved in in the past while the 'big game' represents 'the race for the white man's money'. The second proverb is 'If the rat could not run fast enough it must make way for the tortoise', (p: 169) a proverb we have encountered in less happy circumstances. The rat here clearly refers to the bigger clans who should have been quick enough to take advantage of the new colonial situation. The tortoise who clumsily lumbers on to overtake the fleet-footed rat would stand for 'other people from every small clan some people we used to despise' who had prospered by quickly adjusting to the new colonial dispensation. In Nwodika's case, the people are running to the new colonial culture and economy while in the case of Ezeulu, the god and his priest flee the relentless onslaught of the colonial system thus abandoning their people to the new order.

Achebe appropriates traditional images and symbols to represent the new reality. Winterbottom's corporal asserts: 'The white man is the masked spirit of today.' Akuebue, Ezeulu's friend, agrees: 'Very true, the masked spirit of our day is the white man and his messengers' (p: 154). Traditionally, the masked spirit represents the ancestors, the ultimate in wisdom, power and justice. This position seems to have been usurped by the colonialists. Gikandi (1987) observes that

'money is the new *ikenga*; and the rules that matter most are not those of the ritual dance, but of the market and exchange'. The *ikenga* is the strength of a man's right arm for it represents a man's 'ancestors to whom he must make daily sacrifices.' It is Ebo's *ikenga* which Akukalia desecrated at Okperi which he had to pay for with his life. Money then becomes the new deity and the white man the Chief Priest of this new fetish. John Nwodika remarks: '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 repetition of 'share' is important for the capitalist system is based on shares. Akuebue thinks that the thoughts of Ezeulu and Nwodika 'are brothers' for Nwodika wants a share in the market for Umuaro while Ezeulu wants a share in the white man's positions for his family and his people; that is why he instructs the son he sends to the white man's school: 'If there is something there you will bring home my share' (p: 46).

One of the novelistic and linguistic devices in the novel is the use of symbols. There are two main symbols: wrestling and the mask. Again, the myth of the First Coming of Ulu gives us the necessary background for the use of these symbols. On the second day of the Chief Priest's journey is this interesting account: 'We went on, past streams and forests. Then a smoking thicket crossed my path and two men were wrestling on their heads' (p: 71).

It is our view that the myth of the First Coming of Ulu represents the journey of Umuaro through time. The 'smoking thicket' represents the Umuaro-Okperi war while the 'two men wrestling on their heads' stands for the political confrontation between Ezeulu and Nwaka. Wrestling is a total sport in which all parts of the body are used with no holds barred and in which there seems to be no rules. When the combatants wrestle 'on their heads,' the contest becomes even more bizarre. The political struggle between Ezeulu and Nwaka mirror the dirt of African politics in which mud-slinging, rabble rousing and sabre-rattling seem to be main methods. Nwaka says of Ezeulu, 'The man has caught his mother's madness'. Ezeulu counters by describing Nwaka as 'an overblown fool dangling empty testicles ... because wealth entered his house by mistake' (p: 130).

Among the Igbo as depicted in Achebe's works, wrestling is an important traditional event. In *Things Fall Apart* wrestling is sport for entertainment and for bringing the people together. Okonkwo gets the village beauty to be his wife because he is a champion wrestler. In *Arrow of God*, however, wrestling is violent and has tragic consequences. Ezeulu tells the story of a great wrestler who beats all human opposition and goes into the spirit world and defeats everybody there. He challenges the spirits to bring out their champion to face him. 'So they sent him his personal god, a little wiry spirit who seized him with one hand and smashed

him on the stony earth' (p: 27). This man meets his end fighting against his *chi* or his personal god. He was, in effect, fighting against himself. Most of the conflicts in the story are described as wrestling against the *chi*, or the community fighting itself.

During the debates on the Umuaro-Okperi war, Ezeulu compares Umuaro to 'the little bird, *nza*, who ate and drank and challenged his personal god to single combat'. He remarks:

Umuaro challenged the deity which laid the foundation of their villages. And_ what did they expect? _ he thrashed them enough for today and tomorrow.' (Achebe, 1974: 14)

Umuaro not only decided to go to war against their brothers but also did it against the express pronouncement of their god. It was a war between brothers, 'a war of blame', a confrontation between the community and its god. In short, it was 'wrestling against the *chi*'. Akukalia also, according to Ezeulu, 'challenged his *chi*' (p: 27) He went to Okperi, his motherland and desecrated the gods of one of the citizens. He died violently.

We would expect Ezeulu to know and behave better with all these examples to guide him but does he? When he is released by the white man, his expressed intention is to challenge his enemies back at home. The image John Nwodika gives of this confrontation and which Ezeulu seems to agree with is the 'challenge of Eneke Ntulukpa to man, bird and beast.' Ezeulu fails to see that he is the little bird, Eneke challenging the whole world to single combat. He had advised Umuaro that 'no matter how strong or great a man was he should never challenge his *chi*' (p: 27). He refuses to heed a similar piece of advice from his friend Akuebue: 'No man however great can win judgement against a clan' (p: 131). Ulu says his fight with Idemili is 'to the finish; and whoever throws the other will strip him of his anklet' (p: 192). Earlier, Ezeulu anticipates the same end to his fight with the clan. Ezeulu thus challenges his *chi* by challenging the clan and what did he expect? He was thrashed enough for today and for tomorrow.

One other important symbol in *Arrow of God* as in *Things Fall Apart* is the figure of the mask. Two important rituals in the story are related to the mask: the investiture of the first Ezeulu and Obika's *ogbazulobodo* run. The investiture of the first Ezeulu as a priest is an enmasking. We are informed in the myth that as soon as the deity is put on the first Ezeulu's head he becomes a different person and not surprisingly, the present Ezeulu is treated as a masked figure throughout the story. In the case of Obika, as soon as the *ike-agwu-ani* is hung round his neck, he also becomes a spirit. In Igbo tradition, a masked man is a spirit or an ancestor.

The mask, literally and metaphorically, is a figure of duality and even of duplicity. Ezeulu is half-spirit,

half-man and even though he projects the spirit half, we are never allowed to forget that he is clay. Half black, half white, Ezeulu is the intermediary between the human world and the spiritual, between the colonials and the natives. When his motives are questioned he shifts rapidly from his human to the spiritual frame of reference:

I can see things where other men are blind. That is why I am known and at the same time I am unknowable ... You cannot know the thing which beats the drum to which Ezeulu dances (Achebe, 1974: 132).

He is able to mask his motives which remain ambivalent to the very end. Obika's spiritual state only masks his physical state, weak with malnutrition and fever and in the end, the body has the better of the spirit and he falls down dead. Nwaka dons a mask and delivers a monologue of boasts and taunts to Ulu and his priest. Despite the exterior pomp of his get-up, the interior is the corruption of over-ambition to unseat Ezeulu from his place of pride.

The mask in *Arrow of God* is a symbol of essential values like power and art. Ezeulu and Nwaka with their masks are powerful men. The outdoor of a mask provides Edego the artist the opportunity for self-criticism of his handiwork and also for some critical acclaim. The mask is also the occasion of a father-son quarrel between Ezeulu and Edego. Ezeulu exemplifies the duplicity of the mask. Like a mask, he never allows people around him to share his uncertainties, vulnerabilities and emotions. At the marketplace, we are informed 'his words did not carry the rage in his chest' (p: 144). Later we are informed that thoughts of revenge formed in his mind that night (p: 160). 'As a metaphor and paradigm, the mask is often used in *Arrow of God* to express the tension between tradition and transformation' (Gikandi, 1991). Ezeulu's proverb 'The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place' demonstrates this.

Another device Achebe uses to great effect in *Arrow of God* is songs. Mahood (1977) is not happy that Achebe has cut many of the singing games of children in the Second Edition of *Arrow of God*, 'a great means of half-concealing and half-revealing his authorial intentions' probably to satisfy readers 'who have found only anthropological detail' in them. Mahood has demonstrated that children's songs not only form a part of the social balance and stability, but also express thematic concerns. Obiageli is the songstress of the novel and her songs are well chosen to reflect this balance and thematic considerations. One of her songs expresses the act of pushing responsibility on another person or agent:

And who will punish this Water for me?
E-e Nwaka Dimkpolo

Earth will dry up this water for me
E-e Nwaka Dimkpolo
Who will punish this Earth for me? ... (p: 65)

This song accompanies a folk-tale. The theme of the scapegoat which the song expresses is seen all over the novel. Ulu, Ezeulu, Oduche, the python and the community are all scapegoats at one point or the other in the story. The song also indicates balance for it expresses checks and balances in the traditional system. What the song stresses is that at a point the chain reaction has to stop for it can go no further: 'What can happen to Earth?' In this novel, the clan is the Earth, the ultimate, the untouchable and as Akuebue advises his friend Ezeulu: 'No man however great can win judgement against a clan' (p: 131). Ezeulu tries to smother the economic life of the clan and he has to fail and he does.

The other song is a lullaby and is recorded twice. Part of the song is:

Mother's goat is in the barn
And the yams will not be safe
Father's goat is in the barn
And the yams will all be eaten
(p: 124-186).

In both cases when she sings the song, Obiageli is bearing a human burden too heavy for her but she bears it with pride. The song, therefore demonstrates that in this society, bearing the burden of others is a thing of pride. The song indicates caring for the yam in the barn. Unfortunately, Ezeulu does not show much concern about the yam of the people in the ground. He also needed to bear his burden of suffering on behalf of the people with pride but he fails and this leads to disaster for himself and the society.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we have been investigating how the story and the language of the myth of the state have

been diffused through the community in *Arrow of God*. We have shown that the myth is the blueprint for the use of proverbs and symbols in the novel. Many of the proverbs based on the myth have been used by Ezeulu himself, but Nwaka and a few other characters show that myth diffusion in the community is fairly done. The use of symbols is another way in which the language of myth has been diffused in the community. The two main symbols are that of wrestling and the mask. It is clear from this study that, a community should not only create a myth of the state, but should also take steps to diffuse the language of the myth throughout the society.

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