

## Freud's Return of the Repressed and Conflict in Achebe's *Arrow of God*

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: March 08, 2019

Accepted: May 19, 2019

Published: July 31, 2019

Volume: 8 Issue: 4

Advance access: June 2019

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

### ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe is widely acclaimed as the father of modern African Literature. His works of literature are read beyond the shores of Africa. Although *Things Fall Apart*, created renewed interest in the study of African Literature, *Arrow of God*, is affirmed by critics as the most complex of Achebe's writing in terms of plot development, characterization and setting. Scholars have studied the text in terms of the demise of traditional African society by the imposing force of colonialism. For some of the critics, Ezeulu is seen as a representative figure that is destroyed while defending the cause of his community. This paper takes a different perspective on the various studies of the work. It attempts to discuss conflict in *Arrow of God* using Sigmund Freud's idea of return of the repressed. Conflict is a situation in which people, groups, or countries are involved in a serious disagreement or argument. In this study we shall discuss the various shades of conflict under the following category: Ezeulu in conflict with himself, with his deity and the community using Freud's concept of return of the repressed as a theoretical tool that controls this discussion.

**Key words:** Unconscious, Achebe, Ezeulu, Conflict, Arrow of God

### INTRODUCTION

Many of the studies on *Arrow of God* revolve around the issue of European encounter with African civilization. This seems to be the underlying assumption in G.D. Killiam's, *The Novels of Chinua Achebe*, David Carroll's, *Chinua Achebe*, Eustace Palmer's, *An Introduction to the African Novel*, and Kole Omotoso's *Achebe or Soyinka?: A Study in Contrasts*. But other critics like Arthur Ravenscraft, Kofi Awoonor, Charles Nnolim, and Umelo Ojinmah argue respectively that *Arrow of God* represents the inner conflict that destroyed the African society prior to the coming of European colonialism. However, there does not appear to be many easily available studies on conflict in *Arrow of God* based on Sigmund Freud's idea of return of the repressed, which this paper discusses. Return of the repressed is a schema proposed by Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist who is recognized as the founding father of psychoanalysis. The concept is captured in his early writing especially *The Interpretation of Dream*. Return of the repressed is the process whereby those elements which are repressed or preserved in the unconscious reappear in consciousness or behaviour pattern. In *Art and Literature*, Freud summarizes this concept as follows:

We may have repressed those things, but they have not really gone away. Actually, we never give anything up;

we only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate. These substitute formations make possible the return of the repressed (154).

In this paper, the various aspects of the return of repressed have been discussed. The paper concludes that the source of conflict in *Umuro* emanates from the unconscious return of the 'man' Ezeulu, who is suppressed by the priesthood of Ulu.

### ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

The major source of conflict in *Arrow of God* is constituted at the level of unconsciousness, from this level it extends to other characters in the narrative. Ezeulu as a character is constituted as a figure of double characterization, half man and half spirit. It is from this figure of double destination that conflict arises in the text. During Ezeulu's inauguration as the Chief Priest of Ulu, we read that he 'was transformed into a spirit' (189). The implication of this transformation is well articulated by Joseph Campbell who suggests that by this singular act, Ezeulu 'does not merely represent the god; he is the god' (21). By Ezeulu's transformation into the deity of Ulu he now shares in the divine form of the deity. From this orientation it is assumed that Ezeulu has become a god. The illustration of this new understanding of Ezeulu is evi-

dent during the Feast of Pumpkin leave, which is a purification rite for Umuaro. In one of the celebrations of the Feast of Pumpkin leave, we see Ugoye one of Ezeulu's wives addressing the god:

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. She waved the small bunch in a circle round her head and flung it with all her power at the Chief Priest as he ran past her position (72).

In this ritual act of purification Ezeulu is not in human form but in divine form of the god. Ugoye, the wife sees him not as her husband but as an incarnation of the god made manifest. She addresses her supplication to the god. But there is a problem with the configuration of Ezeulu as the incarnation of the god. In the narrative we do not know who this character was before he became the Chief Priest of Ulu. The name which we know as Ezeulu is associated with his deity, Ulu, which of course overshadows the other aspect of his character which the text is silent on.

It is this man whom we do not know and the man that is called Ezeulu that is the source of conflict in *Arrow of God*. The running battle between the two characters, that is the man Ezeulu as a priest of Ulu and his character as an ordinary citizen of Umuaro consists conflict at the level of unconscious determination. That aspect of his character which is suppressed when he is transformed into a spirit yearns to come into full existence by way of return of the repressed. Even though that aspect of his character is submerged, yet it craves for life. Franco Monti suggests that an individual who is captured in this kind of mould like Ezeulu will always make 'a desire to break out of the human constriction of individual shaped in a specific and immutable mould and closed in a birth-death cycle which leaves no possibility of consciously chosen existential adventure' (9). The man Ezeulu wants to transcend his mould as the Chief Priest of Ulu irrespective of the social norms of Umuaro. Right through the spectrum of the text, we see Ezeulu the man causing trouble for others. This aspect of Ezeulu the man is hinted at by other characters in the narration. Nwaka says that Ezeulu is an 'ambitious man. He wants to be king, priest, and diviner. His father, they said, was like that too' (28); for Ogbuefi Ofoka, 'the man has caught his mother's madness' (212); for Akuebue, 'he is a proud man and the most stubborn person' (212) and for his late wife, 'he expected everyone-his wives, his kinsmen, his children, his friends and even his enemies-to think and act like himself' (92). In view of this we can say that the man Ezeulu is very ambitious, autocratic, and overshadows other character's opinions.

In the first chapter of the narration we are presented with the coming of the new moon and how the household of Ezeulu welcomes it. The narrative gaze focuses on the double nature of Ezeulu. The narrator gives us an insight into the nature of conflict between Ezeulu and his alter ego:

When Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real. It was true he named the day for the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and for the New Yam feast; but he did not choose it. 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. No! The Chief Priest of Ulu was more than that, must be more than that. If he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival-no planting and no reaping. But could he refuse? No Chief Priest had ever refused. So it could not be done. He would not dare. Ezeulu was stung to anger by this as though his enemy had spoken it. 'Take away that word dare', he replied to this enemy. 'Yes I say take it away. No man in all Umuaro can stand up and say that I dare not. The woman who will bear the man who will say it has not been born yet' (3).

One may ask who Ezeulu is addressing at this constitutive crisis of his personality and his loyalty to his deity. This conversational mode takes place within the closest proximity of his unconsciousness. As the priest of Ulu he knows his priestly functions. It is his function to safeguard the lives of the community by carrying out the appropriate rites as required. Since, as an agricultural community the daily life of the people is tied to the seasons of the year. In the passage quoted above, the source of conflict is that Ezeulu the man is in conflict with himself. He wants to override the authority of the god. Hence, we see the direct intervention of the god that no Chief Priest of Ulu has refused to name the day of the New Yam feast. Here we see the upsurge of the return of the repressed aspect of Ezeulu with himself. Nwaka tells us that Ezeulu is an ambitious man and wants to be everything. This we see in Ezeulu's interior utterance, 'Take away that word dare... Yes I say take it away. No man in all Umuaro can stand up and say that I dare not' (3). In another instance we see the grave conflict between Ezeulu and his deity. In this instance of discourse the deity rebukes Ezeulu in his attempt to usurp his authority:

Ta! Nwanu! Barked Ulu in his ear, as a spirit would in the ear of an impertinent human child. Who told you that this was your own fight?. Ezeulu trembled and said nothing, his gaze lowered to the floor. Say who told you that this was your own fight to arrange the way it suits you... Beware you do not come between me and my victim or you may receive blows not meant for you! (192).

This passage is of critical importance; it highlights the conflict between Ezeulu and the god over supremacy in the affairs of the god and man. It is pertinent to note that this is a psychological war between Ezeulu and the deity. One may raise the question, who is warned to beware and what is the relationship between the two interlocutors. Ezeulu the man wants to dictate to the god on how to prosecute the war between him and his enemy. The god has to rebuke Ezeulu the man for him to know that he is an arrow in the hands of his god. As earlier pointed out by Nwaka and others, Ezeulu the

man is very ambitious and would like to be everything. Here, it is the return of the repressed aspect of his character that the deity warns him of. Left for Ezeulu the man he would like to control the god. As the narrator puts it ‘, beware you do not come between me and my victims or you may receive blows not meant for you!’ (192). The narrator captures the conflict embedded in this dyadic relationship between the man Ezeulu and his god.

Another source of conflict, though external, has its source in the overriding attitude of Ezeulu. In the land dispute between Umuaro and Okperi, the issue for determination is not necessarily the disputed land but the overriding attitude of Ezeulu which is associated with his return of the repressed. In his account of Umuaro and Okperi land, Ezeulu testifies that the land in question belongs to Okperi. According to Ezeulu, ‘our village first came here to live the land belonged to Okperi. It was Okperi who gave us a piece of their land to live in’ (15). The source of his authority is oral tradition, as his father told him. In this matter Ezeulu assumes the perspective of what Jonathan Culler calls ‘the view point of experience and wisdom’ (21). However, regarding the issue at stake within the Umuaro community, there are others who have contrary view over the disputed land. Two of such are Nwaka and Akukalia. Nwaka in his account of the land presents a different view from that of Ezeulu. He claims that his own father told him that Okperi people are wanderers who migrated to three or four different places, Umuofia, Abame, and Aninta. Furthermore, in the case of Akukalia he claims that they have been cutting grass from the disputed land for ages. In the Umuaro and Okperi land dispute, the question of truth is problematic. Is it the truth as presented by Ezeulu, who relies solely on what his father told him? One character went further to insinuate that Ezeulu had forgotten whether it was his father or mother that told him about the land. Even though Akukalia and his people might have cut thatches from the land, it does not necessarily confer the status of ownership on Umuaro. The stand of Nwaka that Okperi people are wanderers contradicts the evidence of Ezeulu.

The question of truth is neither here nor there. The reason on which Winterbottom awards the disputed land to Okperi, though not given by the narrator, heightens the conflict in Umuaro and Okperi relationship. The reason Ezeulu testifies against his people is not known to Winterbottom. To a great extent, Ezeulu’s testimony against his people accounts for the internal division in Umuaro. The people of Umuaro hold that Ezeulu betrayed them before the white man. To the people of Umuaro it is a big betrayal considering his high and revered position as the priest of Ulu. Given our knowledge of Ezeulu’s complex personality, the source of this strife may be traceable to the return of the repressed of Ezeulu the man. Ezeulu has that tendency to suppress and override the views of others. This aspect of his character is pointed at by Nwaka and his late wife. At the beginning of Umuaro and Okperi land dispute, Nwaka points to the overriding attitude of Ezeulu. As the narrator puts it:

Nwaka began by telling the assembly that Umuaro must not allow itself to be led by the Chief Priest of Ulu. ‘My father did not tell me that before Umuaro went to war

it took leave from the priest of Ulu,’ he said. ‘The man who carries a deity is not a king. He is there to perform his god’s ritual and carry sacrifice to him. But I have been watching this Ezeulu for many years. He is a man of ambition; he wants to be king, priest, diviner, all. His father, they said was like that too. But Umuaro showed him that Igbo people knew no kings. The time has come to tell his son also (27-28).

Furthermore, Ezeulu’s late wife had said that her husband wants his friends and enemies to think and act like himself. He wants his view to be the final position in every matter whether private or communal. Nwaka claims that Ezeulu inherited this attitude from his father. This mode of behaviour is what Freud calls ‘transference’ (Eagleton, 138). It is a kind of projection or attributing to others the feelings and wishes that are not their own but actually our own. But Ezeulu forgets the dynamics of Igbo politics, that it is republican in structure never accepting the role or position of a king. One man’s view cannot hold sway above others opinion. This is exactly what Akuebe pointed out when he says, ‘it is the pride of Umuaro,’ he said, ‘that we never see one party as right and the other wrong’ (100).

Winterbottom fails to take into consideration the contradictions in the testimony of the parties. John Frow maintains that ‘all utterances are potentially splintered, formally open to contradictory uses’ (63). If we examine critically the testimony of Ezeulu on which the case is decided we will discover that it is full of gaps. For instance, it is worth noting Ezeulu’s claim, ‘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 (15). The problem with his evidence is with the word ‘our village’ (15). One is in doubt about which village Ezeulu is referring to. Is it his personal village of Umuachala or another of the six villages that makes up Umuaro? If the land in dispute is his personal village then Ezeulu is not qualified to speak authoritatively on an issue that concerns the whole village. But if the matter he refers to concerns Umuaro, then Ezeulu should observe the dynamic structure of Igbo society. After all Umuaro is the youngest of the six villages. Therefore, for Winterbottom to base his decision on the testimony of Ezeulu is contemptuous of Igbo judicial system.

Another aspect of the conflict between Ezeulu and the elders of Umuaro hinges on the sacred yam. Ezeulu’s inability to name the day of the new yam feast may not be necessarily connected with his detention at Okperi. Rather, it has more to do with the exercise of his alter ego which is at variance with his priestly function. The new yam feast is a cardinal feast in Umuaro that marks the end of the year and beginning of a new one. In terms of religious significance it affords the community the opportunity to renew their loyalty to Ulu as their god. It is also a form of census for the community. During this feast, the Chief Priest selects the thirteen sacred yams. Furthermore, it is the time to pay homage to other minor deities; and a moment that brings the god and men together.

The conflict between Ezeulu and the elders of the community over the new feast may be aptly summarized in what one

may call universal application of the law and existential need. By universal application of the law it means strict adherence to the letters of the law irrespective of the circumstances prevailing at the moment. The existential need presupposes that the law is manmade and must of necessity give way to the existential needs of man irrespective of the circumstance. The first position was upheld by Ezeulu and the second by elders of Umuaro. However, central to the disposition of the two groups is their understanding of their god, Ulu. For the elders of Umuaro who uphold the existential view, their god, Ulu is there all the time to serve their needs. To them Ulu is their savour. Their notion of Ulu as a savour is encapsulated in the speech of Nnanyelugo:

Shall we then sit down and watch our harvest ruined and our children and wives die of hunger? No! Although I am not the priest of Ulu I can say that the deity does not want Umuaro to perish. We call him the saviour. Therefore you must find a way out, Ezeulu. If I could I would go now and eat the remaining yams. But I am not the priest of Ulu. It is for you, Ezeulu, to save our harvest (207).

Nnanyelugo's speech highlights what a large segment of Umuaro believes to be the relationship between the people and their god. For the elders of the community this relationship is dynamic and changes with time. But the issue for Ezeulu is not as simple as that presented by Nnanyelugo. It has to do with ritual act which is very central to the worship of the deity. To Ezeulu, announcing the New Yam feast is a ritual act and must be observed in a ritual manner, irrespective of the existential hunger. In this regard, Ezeulu advances his argument by reminding the elders of the community that this yam is not an ordinary yam but a ritual meal.

'You have spoken well. But what you ask me to do is not done. Those yams are not food and a man does not eat them because he is hungry. You are asking me to eat death' (207). This crisis that is faced by Ezeulu is what makes for tragedy in literature. The protagonist is in confrontation with more than man. He is caught up in a tragic stream; whatever position he takes results in tragedy. For Ezeulu to be with the people is to incur the wrath of the god; to be with the god is to be against the people of Umuaro. He is caught up in what Karl Jaspers, calls 'boundary situation', where one is confronted with the deepest question of existence' (cited in Akwanya, 26).

In this matter, Ezeulu is faced with the deep crisis that threatens his priesthood and portends danger for the community; yet there is an element of the return of the repressed at the background of this encounter between the Chief Priest and the community. On the surface of the text is a plain dialogue between Ezeulu and the elders of Umuaro. Beneath it at the level of unconsciousness is Ezeulu's desire to punish Umuaro for his perceived abandonment at Okperi. One of the elders had made this point at some stage in their discussion, saying that Ezeulu has been looking for an opportunity to punish Umuaro and now he had got it. Though we have two ideological perspectives on this matter of the sacred yam; Ezeulu's desire for revenge adds to the crisis more than their different positions held by the

respective groups. One character who reads through Ezeulu on this matter more than any other is Oforka. He asks Ezeulu 'on whose side are you, Ezeulu. I think you have just said that you have become the whip with which Ulu flogs Umuaro' (209). Another character that captures this subtle manoeuvre by Ezeulu is the omniscient narrator. When the assistants come to make inquiry concerning the new yam feast, Ezeulu dismisses them. In between this moment the narrator captures the joy of revenge radiating from the unconscious state of Ezeulu which stirred the crisis of the new yam feast:

If anyone had come into Ezeulu's hut after the men had left he would have been surprised. The old man's face glowed with happiness and some of his youth and handsomeness returned temporarily from across the year (207).

What the narrator discloses here is what is happening at the depth of Ezeulu's consciousness. One may ask, why did Ezeulu's face radiate with happiness considering the problem facing Umuaro? There is nothing in the whole matter to excite him to the extent that the narrator expresses his surprise at the old man. The argument put up by Ezeulu on the universal application of the law is a mask to hide his desire for revenge against the community. If his argument is not a means to deal with the people of Umuaro, the visit of the elders should have resolved the problem. After all, the elders constituted the deity and can always appease it. Between the elders of Umuaro and Ezeulu stands the alter ego of Ezeulu which people like Nwaka earlier pointed at. It is this conflict between the double personalities of Ezeulu that actually is the source of conflict in Umuaro. Instead of saying the will of the god, his alter ego takes pre-eminence over the decisions of the god over the community. This leads to the demise of Umuaro as autonomous community and the entrenchment of Western civilization.

## CONCLUSION

The source of conflict in *Arrow of God* is accountable to the dyadic configuration of Ezeulu; he is structured in the mould of his deity, yet his humanity interferes with his daily life by means of what Freud calls the return of the repressed. The crisis generated by this dyadic configuration is seen at different moments with his deity, the community and with himself. All these crises as argued emanate as a result of his character, the man Ezeulu which is suppressed when he became the Chief Priest of Ulu. As a result, this repressed character of the man, Ezeulu, makes conscious effort to manifest itself but is unconsciously repressed by his priestly character, Ezeulu.

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