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(Mis)Conception of Leadership and the Tragedy in Achebe's Arrow of God

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Abstract:

Leadership, from the face of it, defines itself by its compelling demands on leaders for timely and unwavering decisions, an unflagging tenacity and unshaken resolve to bear the responsibility for actions carried out and decisions taken in the contestation and exercise of power. However, Achebe's Arrow of God implicates the contrasting, and even conflicting other views on the notion of leadership in the tensions that eventuated in the indiscriminate tragedy in the novel, as it belies the view that the tragedy is singularly occasioned by Ezeulu's hubris. This paper contends that the contestation over the exercise of power, which resolved in tragedy, between the High-Priest of Ulu and the elders of the clan ensued from the conflicting views of the concept of leadership which they respectively hold. To Ezeulu, his leadership of the people draws its legitimacy and power directly and exclusively from the clan god, Ulu, thus the insolence, stark obduracy and impenitence of Ezeulu. Conversely, the elders of the clan conceive of the legitimacy and power of Ezeulu's leadership as singularly sprouting from the communal and collective wishes of the people, even where the calling of his office is particularly religious. The implications of his office across a wide spectrum of the lives of the people discloses as it questions the boundaries of religion in the socio-cultural space of the clan. The paper thus concludes that the many tensions and displacements which ensued from the colonial contact acquired far greater drive or impellent towards the tragic from the contending (mis)conceptions of leadership between the two most powerful centrifugal forces in the clan: The High-Priest, Ezeulu, and the elders of the clan, than from Ezeulu's insolence and brazen disregard for contrary views.

1. Introduction

A number of studies, a few among which include Emenyonu 1991; Lindfors 1997; and Nnolim 2010 have unarguably recognized Chinua Achebe's novel, Arrow of God, and particularly its 'intellectual hero' (Emenyonu, 1991:53) as tragic.

Tragedy, on the other hand, has been defined in the Poetics of Aristotle, as 'the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself... (Involving) incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotion'. This notion of the tragic informs some aspects of Achebe's tragic novels, Arrow of God for example, in which 'the hero who finds himself in an untenable, often extreme situation, is at the same time a man of uncompromising will, who eventually pays full price for what he wants and for the course of action he has chosen to pursue' (Nnolim,2010:127).Nnolim further identifies certain resemblance in aspects of Achebe's notion of tragedy with those of the classical Greco-Roman concept of tragedy. A particularly significant affinity is that in both Achebe's and the classical Greco-Roman conceptions, is the transcendental significance of the tragic events beyond the confines of its occurrence and the immediacy of its consequence.

Beyond the affinities however, are significant and markedly distinguishing features of Achebe's concept of the tragic from the classical Greco-Roman's. Classical notion of tragedy is often of an individual up against unfathomable forces, but the Achebean (or if you like, African) conception of tragedy is often communal and religious – though one must concede here that early classical Greek tragedies have clearly and loudly pronounced religious undertones, yet it must be stated that subsequent European tragedies largely dropped or ignored the religious nature and implications of the tragic events. Whence forward, the protagonist or 'culture-hero' Ezeulu in Arrow of God, for example, 'represents the collective consciousness of Umuaro as a community, and his disintegration in the end mirrors the disintegration of Umuaro as a community' (Nnolim,2010: 128). Moreover, Achebe's tragic heroes are not made pawns in the hands of gods or fate nor are they tied to a predetermined end. Instead, Achebe recalls in them, Ezeulu particularly, the image of Seneca's the Sovereign Person, in his *De Clementia*. The Sovereign *Princeps*, like Ezeulu, has a clear and lucid conception of his power:

→ Have I, of all mortals found favour with the gods and been chosen to act on earth in their stead? I am the judge with power of life and death over nations; I have the fate and condition of every one in my hands. All dispensations of fortune to mortals are made through pronouncements on my lips. My verdict is what gives people and cities cause to rejoice. No region anywhere flourishes but by my will and favour. These swords in their countless thousands sheathed through the peace that I bring, will be drawn at my nod...

(Stacey, Peter, 2001:1)

Though Ezeulu, the Chief- Priest of Ulu, manifests similar clarity and lucid understanding of his power as the *Princeps* in Seneca's *De Clementia*, *Achebe*, however, invests Ezeulu with a blurring feeling of ambivalence. An ambivalence which often makes him doubt the reach and implications of his power: Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real (p3).

The contestations over power, authority, and leadership, concepts I have deliberately chosen not to view from the specular of the Social Sciences to avoid the immensely wide and burgeoning terminologies drawn into the conflicting explications and conceptualizations of those ideas, are central to the discourse on the conception and/or misconception of leadership, and the ensuing tragedy in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, this paper therefore chooses to retain their every-day common meanings.

2. The Conceptions and/or Misconception of Leadership and the Tragedy in Arrow of God

Operating within the confines of the theme of this 50th anniversary celebration of Chinua Achebe's novel *Arrow of God*, this paper inclines toward a re-reading of the tragedy in *Arrow of God* which identifies other tensions, particularly the socio-religious and political tensions in the novel and ascribes to them the tragic end of the novel. This is done in recognition of the vast possibilities for meanings and socio-political relevance of the novel to the contemporary societies in their search for potent suggestions and directions which literature readily provides.

It is the contention of this paper that a significant impetus to the tragedy of both Ezeulu and Umuaro is located in the misconception of the depth and implications of the powers and authority of the Chief-Priest of Ulu vis-à-vis the aspirations and yearnings of the people.

The community of Umuaro willingly invests Ezeulu with the authority and power of the Chief-Priest of their highest god, Ulu thus making Ezeulu a leader among leaders in Umuaro, a federation of six villages. However, the cautious beginning of this federation soon begins to get muddled up with malicious claims of over-ambition and heedlessness leveled against the Chief Priest of Ulu by his rivals from across the six federating villages of Umuaro. The contestation between Ezeulu and elders of the federating community of Umuaro over the source, nature, extent and implications of the exercise of the authority and power vested on Ezeulu eventuates in the disintegration of the hitherto cohesive and united federation of Umuaro.

To properly engage the conception and/or misconception of leadership in *Arrow of God*, the ensuing present discourse recognizes the imperative of locating it within the subsisting power structure in Umuaro.

Umuaro emerged from the amalgamation of Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezeani, Umuogwugwu, Umuisiuzo, and Umuachala. The federation is known as Umuaro. The willing association of the six villages under a federation is a deliberate and willing expression of the six amalgamated villages to concede a significant part of their identity, independence, and cultural exclusivity to the federation. To indicate their collective loyalty and unflagging resolve to sustain the federation, each of the six federating villages relegates its gods to the superiority of a new god, Ulu which they collectively created. This parallels the adoption of a federal constitution over regional constitutions (as well as local conventions, social and cultural values)

It is instructive to note that the federation was essentially motivated by the human imperative for self-preservation. The elders of the six villages have come to the cold realization that singly and individually, each of the six villages faces the threat of extermination at the hands of the Abam warriors. They therefore resolved to unite as one nation in order to pool their resources together towards providing effective defence against any external aggression, particularly the aggressive Abam warriors. Here again is lesson for the present, and this is that a federation is sustained, promoted and defended only when it ensures and provides an unfailing sense of security for life and property, and possibilities for the realization of individual and collective dreams and aspirations on a platform of justice, mutual trust and respect.

The parallelism between Umuaro and a federal system of government provides the main framework within which other parallels that inundate the narrative in *Arrow of God* operate, and which Achebe has imbued with an inevitable sense of the tragic. At the epicentre of the contestation for and dispensation of power is the parallel between Ezeulu the man/spirit and Ezeulu the pragmatic/ideologue. This bi-partite nature of Ezeulu instigates intense internal conflict within him. Though Ezeulu, the man is often pragmatic, accommodating, and compromising; Ezeulu the spirit is imbued with a sense of pride arrogance, self-righteousness, and as an ideologue, resolutely loyal and ungrovelling in the promotion and protection of his ideological stance. It is this attitude that leads to the excruciating tension between Ezeulu and the elders over the consumption of two yams in the same month, which was the consequence of the detention of Ezeulu for thirty-two days by the colonial officer, Mr Winterbottom. Ezeulu, the ideologue insists on observing the law in its spirit and letters. His supposition of the primacy of the law above the needs and aspirations of the very people the law is meant to defend, protect and promote their wellbeing prove Ezeulu's fatal undoing. Laws, this event seems to suggest, should be pliable to the legitimate and collective yearnings of the people. Where it ceases to act in consonance with the yearnings and aspirations of the people, it inadvertently provides recipe for its desecration and abandonment. The case of the people of Aninta and their disappointing god is a ready example: And we have all heard how the people of Aninta dealt with their deity when he failed them. Did they not carry him to the boundary between them and their neighbours and set fire on him? (*Arrow of God*, p.28)

The rigidity of the law and the executors of the law, Ezeulu for example, further aggravates the crumbling unity of the federation and the tenacious relationship between the law-giver (god/constitution), its High-Priest, and the law-makers (elders/the people). While the elders/people see the god/laws as their very own creation: Every boy in Umuaro knows that Ulu was made by our fathers long ago.(p.44) .Ezeulu, the High-Priest of the law-giver, Ulu, views his authority and power as divinely inspired, and, therefore not beholden to any man. This stand-off between Ezeulu and elders/people degenerates into a near anarchy when some of the elders, Nwaka and Ezidimili for example, begin to flaunt anarchical ideas and suggestions around.

In sum, the failure of the leadership and followership to provide an enduring political structure that is at once immediate and anticipatory in its provisions, whittles and erodes the very dreams and aspirations upon which the federation was founded. This results

in the emergence of a chasm between the leadership and the people, and the federation gradually assumes the potency and volatility of a heated keg of gun powder.

Ezeulu's loyalty to the god of his people he mistakes for loyalty to the yearnings of his people. This misunderstanding of what the leaders (Ezeulu/god) conceive of the nature, source, demands and manifestations of leadership vis-à-vis the elders/people's view of the same issue remain a potent impetus to the tragedy that ensued in Achebe's 50-year old novel, *Arrow of God*.

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