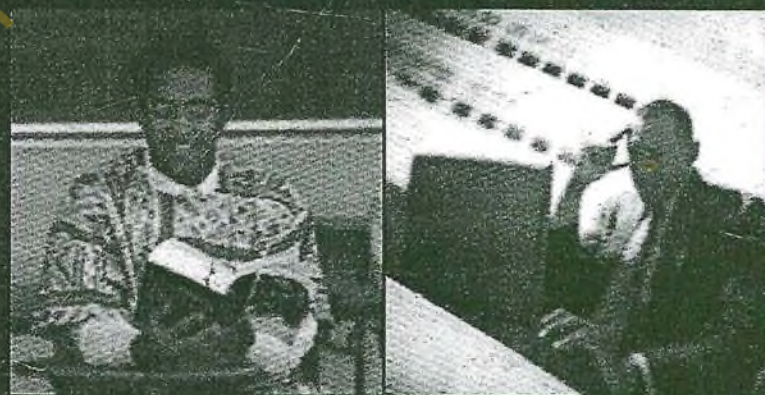


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## **African Proverbial Sayings: A Paremiological Reading of Achebe's *Arrow of God***

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Africans are a culturally deep and psychologically peculiar people. Proverbs constitute a major form of collective consciousness through which Africans communicate ideas and opinions. Several studies reveal that thought patterns, attitudes and psyche of peoples are comprehensible through paremiology, the study of proverbs. Nigeria's Chinua Achebe has carved out a niche for himself as an African Proverbialist. This article examines the psycho-cultural value of proverbial sayings in his work. The application of this linguistic form as a dominant tool in the narrative technique and in the portraiture of the themes and characters is the focus of this study which takes as reference, *Arrow of God*, a work that concretizes the African psycho-cultural crisis. It examines the psychological, philosophical and cultural values embedded in the African proverbial folio.

### I

Speech communities all over the world engage in proverbialisms as a form or type of linguistic tool. Its usage may be controlled or conditioned by variables such as gender, age, class, and cultural values. In most parts of the world, proverbs perform similar functions in speech. These include training, indoctrination, and transference of history and culture. The value of proverbs is not necessarily in its being a universal concept but in its being a pragmatically germane linguistic tool for all speech communities.

Wang Qin (1996) observes that 'the character of a people is clearly branded in its proverbs'. Therefore, the study of a people's proverbs is likely to reveal a lot about the people's history, cultural tradition, mores, morality, sense of value, geographical environment and so forth. However, the social usages of Korean proverbs appear to be the exception to the rule. Chong-wa Chung (1996) explains that the functions of proverbs in the Korean society differ from other communities. The speech form is 'a cultural heritage of the lower class of the society and is not shared by the upper class, who had for their cultural vehicle the 'Sijo' poetry...' (1996:7). Therefore the Korean proverb is a preserve of the lower class of the society and, the language,



Chung observes, is in most cases vulgar and coarse. The commoners, through this medium, reconstruct the depth of the hardship they suffer, unleash their anger and frustrations upon the ruling class, warn contemporaries against the dangers that life holds, and express joyful experiences.

However, whether the form is employed as guidelines, maxims for life, or as principles to be followed, proverbs serve as a store of striking truths and social identity of a people. African proverbs perform several functions. They paradoxically assert practical truths that reflect primarily on the culture, psychology and philosophy of the African. Lady Kofo Ademola (2002 Vols. 1&2) states that the African proverb possesses qualities that enable it to convey the mores, values, beliefs, wisdom, philosophy, as well the cultural tenets of the African peoples. Proverbs, she continues,

...enrich a language: they give in-depth meaning to words  
...a person who could intersperse speech with apt  
proverbs was regarded as someone with great wisdom  
and culture (2002:9).

Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian of Igbo extraction is from a tribe that celebrates the *Okwu Oka* (oratory) religiously.

Said Achebe:

I have often said that one of the most important genres in Igbo is oratory, and that is not preserved in the same way that proverbs, anecdotes, and stories are preserved. This is a matter of individual excellence it is a part of Igbo culture. There is no way of preserving it unless you record people's voices. All that is part of the inheritance I feel I am working with. Proverbs are just a portion of this inheritance (Cited in Egejuru, 1996:79).

The Igbo speech is well known for its success in oratory but within this is the specific use of apt proverbs to achieve resounding success. To the Igbo any '... speech that is not purchased with apt proverbs and idioms is regarded as naked' (Nwadike, 1989:31).

A close study of Achebe's *Arrow of God* reveals that the Igbo man does not only punctuate his speeches with proverbs, but that he can go on talking for a length of time without using plain language. The Igbo proverb is described by Igbo scholars as 'a form of speech which is pregnant with meaning. More often than not, it confounds the unintelligent that is not used to the form' (31). The Igbo speakers define it as *abubo eji eri okwu* (Obiefuna 1978); proverbs are condiments of speech (32). Achebe's *Arrow of God* has been described by some critics as a dictionary of Igbo proverbial sayings. Nwadike (1989:36) asserts



that there are specific functions performed by the Igbo proverb. According to him, each in its own genre:

has something to underscore such as caution, praise, encouragement, dissuasion, children upbringing, self control, thrift, hard work...

Summing up his analysis, Nwadike concludes that the form embellishes and reinforces arguments, that they are mnemonic devices through which all principles relevant to successful living is committed to memory. They perform ideological functions by being available in maxims, memorable maxims which can be easily recalled. One can say without any fear of contradiction that African writers use proverbs as artistic devices in their works. The literary effusions of the first generation of African writers who wrote the continent into history (a group proudly led by Achebe) is marked with the use of proverbial sayings which emerge in these works as techniques for reinforcing and rediscovering the cultural, religious and psychological values of the African people.

To Bernth Lindfors 'Proverbs are horses of speech':

... they can be employed not only to retrieve communication gone astray but to speed it up, slow it down, convey messages, deliver light-hearted jests, sharpen arguments, blunt criticism, clarify difficult ideas and disguise simple ones beyond easy recognition (2002:105).

In Obiechina's opinion, proverbs give:

complexity to narrative, unity of form, coherence and pattern to action, and direction to moral and social insight. They can also indicate force and resourcefulness of character... (1995:157).

In *Arrow of God*, proverbs are used to define the novel's action and support the development of plot, stirring up depths of emotional response to the conflicts and action.

Achebe is a master of the proverbial art. Zulu Sofola, in an article titled 'Achebe Eze Nka - the Master Artist', describes Achebe's *Nka*, the word for art, as the soul of art or creative force. She accords Achebe the title of *Eze Nka* because, in her words, he towers 'above all else and stands out as a master artist' (47). The proverbial sayings of his people which he artistically celebrates is not a coincidence and a number of critics have written assuming that it would be undermining



*Doyin Aguoru: A Paremiological Readings of Achebe's Arrow of God*  
Achebe's artistic prowess (*okwu oka*) in several ways linguistically, psychologically, restored the dignity of the African from the imperialist's debasement.

In Achebe's words, his aim was clear:

To help (the) society regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self abasement ... it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul. The writer cannot be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front... (Cited in Sofola, 1996:46).

It is in this sense that Achebe situates his early novels in the communities and ensures that the culture, values and characteristics of these communities tower above all other characters in the novels (Ker, 2003:126).

*Arrow of God*, his third novel, is set in the tribal society. The setting and mood of the period portrayed is enhanced by the systemic use of proverbs. This, the author uses to evoke the cultural milieu within which the action takes place. Achebe's proverbs can serve as keys to an understanding of his novels 'Lindfors says, because he uses them not just to add 'touches of local colour but to sound and reiterate themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflict and to focus on the values of the society he is portraying' (2002:77).

## II

Critical writings on Achebe's works pronounce *Arrow of God* the most complex of his works. Through his themes, proverbial sayings, wise sayings, metaphors and similes, the work creates an intriguing impression upon its readers about the African orientation and particularly the Igbo man's way of life. The principles Achebe espouses on conflict, character, unity, and patience, consequences of choice, truth, foresight, and vengeance remain relevant to contemporary situations in Africa today.

Inability to comprehend the worth of proverbial sayings in a given work can be likened to the Igbo saying:

*Onye nzuzu jeer ikpe biliri illa mgbe o huru ka ndi ozona-ala,  
mana-aju mgbe aga-ebi ikpe-* The unintelligent who



attended a gathering for the settlement of a dispute rose to go when he saw others do so but wondered when a decision would be given (because proverbs were used, he failed to understand when the ruling was given (Nwadike, 1989:37).

This psycho-cultural analysis is carried out from six synchronising perspectives: The Coming together of Umuaro, The Okperi War, Tunes in the House of a Great Man, Oduche the Proverbial Lizard, Akuebe and Ezedimili as Foils, Proverbialism and Ogbazulobodo: the Spirit of Death.

Conflict in *Arrow of God* is woven around the people of Umuaro. Ezeulu the Chief Priest is the personality through which the omniscient narrator introduces the reader to the state of affairs in Umuaro. The burning thoughts of the Chief Priest as he performs the monthly rites of welcoming the moon reveal the historical event that leads to the creation of the deity Ulu. It also lays a background to the preceding events and the consequences of the Okperi War that brings about the European incursion and presence in Umuaro. The physical, psychological, ideological and cultural tension set from the beginning of the novel which starts *in medias res* is tangibly felt and the use of proverbs is the dominant tool employed in the land.

### *The Coming Together of Umuaro*

'... But Umuaro had grown wise and very strong in its own conceit and had become like *the little bird nza, who ate and drank and challenged his personal god to a single combat* (Achebe, 1967:17). Six villages, Umuachala, Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezeani, Uuogwugwu, and Umuisiuzo, are under constant oppression of the hired soldiers of Abam. The leaders come together under the name Umuaro and install a common deity, Ulu, and are never defeated again. Ezeulu's bitterness springs up from the attitude of the offspring of these same peoples to the '...god who had founded their town and protected it (18).

### *The Okperi War*

The leaders of Umuaro, perhaps because of the indemnity granted them by Ulu, decide to send emissaries to challenge the people of Okperi over a long-standing land dispute. At a village gathering summoned to consider the issue, Ezeulu dissuades Umuaro from taking the unwise decision of going to war over a wrongfully contested land. Proverbial sayings that eventually determine the fate of Umuaro are flung from the



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three sides from which the issues were raised.

'Ulu would not fight in an unjust war,' (18) the Chief Priest cries. Nwaka, a wealthy chief, portrayed as Ezeulu's archenemy, waters down the priest's counsel and knowledge about the ownership of the disputed land with a saying '*Wisdom is like a goatskin everyman carries his own. Knowledge of the land is also like that*' (19). Nwaka gives another version of the story as told him by his father. Nwaka's argument carries the day as we are told: 'Nwaka had totally destroyed Ezeulu's speech' (20). Ogbuefi Egowanne, one of the three oldest men in Umuaro, counsels the younger men sent as emissaries to Okperi on the manner and approach to adopt while conveying the message. He says,

But I am an old man, and an old man is here to talk. *If the lizard of the homestead neglects to do the things for which its kind is known it will be mistaken for the lizard of the farmland* (20 & 21).

Ezeulu is enraged by the hypocrisy of the elder and his sense of irresponsibility. He defies the man's counsel and also predicts its consequences of taking to such counsel with three proverbs:

*'When an adult is in the house the she-goat is not left to suffer the pains of parturition on its tether' (21). '...a boy sent by his father to steal does not go stealthily but breaks the door with his feet?' (22).*

*'When we hear a house has fallen do we ask if the ceiling fell along with it?' (22)*

Akukalia, a brave young man whose maternal parentage is of Okperi, is appointed to lead the emissaries. He assumes that he understands the people and therefore advises the others to leave him to tackle them: 'So leave them to me because *when a man of cunning dies a man of cunning buries him*' (24). His mother's people welcome him albeit apprehensive of his unusual visit early on a market day. The urgency with which the emissaries wanted to deliver the message is wrapped up in another saying: '*...an important mission; yes. We have a saying that the toad does not run in the day unless something is after it*' (25).

Akukalia is killed in the conflict that ensues in the course of his team delivering the message and it is his corpse that returns to Umuaro. This tragedy necessitates another assembly of the elders of Umuaro. At this meeting many of the elders advice that the matter be laid to rest but others would not hear of it. Achebe's in his authorial comment observes,

but there were others who, as the saying was *pulled out their hair and chewed it*. They swore that they would not live and see Umuaro spat



upon' (31).

Ezeulu's response to the eloquent orations of his kinsmen reflect his sorrow:

'The reed we are blowing is now crushed'. He reminds them of his advice on the issue at the previous gathering '...I used one proverb. I said *when the adult is in the house the she-goat is not left to bear its young from the tether*' (31). He used the proverb to describe the posture of the elders of Umuaro who should have spoken against the plan. They -the elders- were quiet with the exception of Ogbuefi Egowanne who in Ezeulu's words '*Put a live coal into a child's palm and asked him to carry it with care. We have all seen with what care he carried it*' (31).

He accuses the elders of abandoning their responsibility and attending to frivolities 'they were in the house and yet the she-goat suffered in her parturition' (31). He accuses them of challenging their chi (god and deity) and also pushing Akukalia to untimely death. He tells the tale of a great wrestler who challenges spirits violently. Although his flute player admonishes him and ask him to come away, the wrestler remains stubborn and sets the stage for his destruction. As far as Ezeulu was concerned Umuaro had been Akukalia's 'Flute player, but we did not plead with him to come away from death ... *the fly that has no one to advice it follows the corpse in to the grave*' (32). 'But,' he continues, 'Let the slave who sees another cast into a shallow grave know that he will be buried in the same way when his day comes' (32). Reaffirming his position and that of his god on the land dispute and Akukalia's death he concludes: 'If you go to war to avenge a man who has passed shit on the head of his mother's father, Ulu will not follow you to be soiled' (32).

Umuaro goes to war with Okperi and there are killings on both sides. The colonial government led by Captain T.K Winterbottom invade Okperi and Umuaro, disarm the warriors, and put an end to the war by establishing European presence in the towns.

### ***Tunes in the House of a Great Man: Characters in Ezeulu's Household***

Achebe from his omniscient point of view portrays, through characterization, the values and vanities that make or mar a man. Ezeulu's compound is a large one. Achebe carefully portrays each character and develops them in such a way that they are relevant to the plot structure of the work. Edogo, Ezeulu's first son is a carver. His character and personality is consistently compared with that of Obika, his younger brother. Edogo with whom Ezeulu has little or no patience, combines his carving profession with farming in his spare time. He sulks most of the time, perhaps because he is aware that his father's opinion of him is low, and partly because his father's attitude and utterances confirm this. On an occasion his father had made enquires about his carving a god and observing that he was not forthcoming he



*Doyin Aguoru: A Paremiological Readings of Achebe's Arrow of God* yelled: '... You may carve all the gods in Umuaro. If you hear me asking you about it again take my name and give it to a dog' (5).

Ezeulu prefers Obika, who is described as 'great' and 'manly', for several reasons: the striking resemblance they share, his strength, and his comeliness. Achebe describes him as 'one of the handsomest young men in Umuaro' (12). Obika's weaknesses, palmwine and a fiery temper, were sources of concern to his father who, in spite of these weaknesses, still preferred him to Edogo his 'quiet and brooding' half brother. Occasionally in the narrative, Ezeulu will proverbialize his counsel to his beloved son:

It is praiseworthy to be brave or fearless,' he once said, 'but sometimes it is better to be a coward. *We often stand in the compounds of a coward to point at the ruins where a brave man used to live. The man who has never submitted to anything will soon submit to the burial mat* (13).

Apparently, Ezeulu would rather have a smart boy who broke utensils in his haste than a slow and careful snail as a son.

Obika's choice of friend however is a source of disagreement between him and his father. Ofoedu is a typical never-do-well who indulges in drinking. Ezeulu is persuaded that if his son continues to befriend Ofoedu, he will not succeed in life. After a drinking spree with his friend on a previous day, Obika arrives late to the road construction project carried out by his age group. Mr Wright, the European in charge of the road, whips Obika for his lateness and his comical disruption of the roadwork. Ezeulu hears of the whipping and sends Edogo to make enquires.

Edogo comes back in the company of Obika and his friend which further infuriates Ezeulu who could 'never get used to this worthless young man who trailed after his son like a vulture after a corpse' (110). The chief priest is certain that the drinking of the previous day must have been the cause of his son's folly and subsequent humiliation. Without waiting for further explanation he states 'let me tell you that this is only the beginning of what palm wine will bring to you. *The death that will kill a man begins as an appetite*' (110). Edogo, in his characteristic contemplative mood, broods over his father's attitude. The trouble with his father was that 'he could never see something and take his eyes away from it' (110). His mother had been right in her assessment of Ezeulu's attitude and approach to life:

Ezeulu's only fault was that he expected everyone - his wives, his kinsmen, his children, his friends and even his enemies - to think like him and to act like him (114).

Edogo considers this attitude in the light of a saying that says '*if a man sought for a companion who acted entirely like himself he would live in solitude*' (114). Edogo, who stammers agonizingly when deeply affected by serious issues, discloses the depth of his disagreement with



his father in a dialogue with his father's friend, Akuebe. Achebe characterizes Edogo as a weak, even pitiable character. From Akuebe's point of view, Edogo has more than a passing interest in becoming the Chief Priest of Ulu but lacks the courage to say so. He feels pity and a little contempt for the young man:

*The fellow does not fall where his body might be picked up... it does not require an oracle to see that he is not the man for Chief Priest. A ripe maize can be told by merely looking at it (156).*

At the end of the narrative, one perceives that Edogo, though weak, is insightful. His suspicion that Ezeulu was grooming Nwafo their youngest brother for the office of the Chief Priest is not unfounded.

Obika's fiery temper is described in two parts of the narrative. He humiliates Otakpeli, a wicked medicine man at the masquerade festival where his age group brings out a new mask. His father and wife heave sighs of relief when Otakpeli leaves the arena, although the father thinks that his son's action is rash and foolish. At the orders of Captain Winterbottom, a messenger is instructed to invite Ezeulu to the Government Hill. He, Obika, shouts at the insolent messenger saying that he has no grain of sense in his belly. He also tells him on two occasions that he is mad.

Obika's distinct personality is portrayed illustratively and proverbially in the narrative. For instance, the perfection with which he severs the head of the sacrificial ram at the masquerade festival, the speed for which he is known, and the articulate manner with which he speaks qualifies him now and again to carry Ogbazulobodo:

*No other person could carry the Ogbazulobodo as well as Obika in the village. Whenever somebody else tried there was always a big difference: either the speed was too slow or the words stuck in his throat (279).*

Obika is called upon to run as *Ogbazulobodo* by the Amalu's family. Though he had a fever he was implored and thus entreated:

*There are many people who can do it...but he who is called again and again by those trying in vain to catch a wild bull has something he alone can do to bulls (280).*

Obika's collapse and death after running as *Ogbazulobodo* for Amalu's funeral 'shook Umuaro to its roots; the general consensus was that a man like him did not come into the world too often' (285). These two



characters Edogo and Obika fulfill Akuebe's proverbial saying that

*...in all great compounds there must be people of all minds- some good, some bad, some fearless, and some cowardly; those who bring in wealth and those who scatter it, those who give good advice and those who only speak the words of palm wine. That is why we say that whatever tune you play in the compound of a great man there is always some one to dance to it (124).*

### **Oduche the Proverbial Lizard**

Oduche, the third son of Ezeulu, is the controversial figure in the narrative. It is on the account of his involvement with the church that Umuaro concludes that Ezeulu is the white man's friend and has joined the detractors of the customs of Umuaro to desecrate the land. Ezeulu sends Oduche to church three years after the Okperi war. Ezeulu witnesses against his people during the European intervention and legal proceedings that pronounced Okperi the rightful owners of the disputed land. He enlists the boy after he makes the White man the promise to do so, also having ensured that 'the White man had not come for a short visit but to build a house and live' (55).

Oduche goes to church with his heart full of pride after his father speaks to him about his mission amongst the Europeans and the church-going natives.

The world is changing ... I do not like it. But I am like the bird Eneke -nti- oba. When his friend asked him why he was always on the wing he replied '*men of today have learnt to shoot without missing 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 not befriend the White man today will be saying had I known tomorrow (55).



Oduche makes remarkable progress in his educational and religious pursuits. The expectations of his tutors are high because he is one of the youngest converts. The arrival and activities of Mr Goodcountry, a zealous native priest from the Niger Delta, marked the turning point in the life of Oduche. While teaching the natives on a certain day, Goodcountry cites as example; the Niger Delta Christians who '...fought the bad customs of their people, destroyed shrines and killed the sacred iguana,' (56). Goodcountry issues a challenge to the Christians in Umuarò. He prompts them to kill the sacred royal python of Idemili and says: 'if you are afraid to kill it do not count yourself Christians' (57).

Moses Unachukwu, the first convert in Umuaro challenges Goodcountry over the issue, citing references from the Bible and the ancient myths of Umuaro. Oduche was caught in the cross fire when he innocently chipped in a scriptural verse: 'Did not God tell Adam to crush the serpent which deceived his wife?' (59). Goodcountry seizes this opportunity to humiliate Unachukwu. He commends Oduche, whose name he promised to change to Peter at his baptism, which was fast approaching. Unachukwu responds with two proverbial sayings:

I have been to the fountain head of this new religion and seen with my own eyes the white people who brought it. So I want to tell you now that I will not be led astray by *outsiders who choose to weep louder than the owners of the corpse* (60).

Throwing a challenge at Oduche with this statement:

You may be called Peter, or you may be called Paul or Barnabas; it does not pull a hair from me. And I have nothing to say to a mere boy who should be picking palm nuts for his mother. But since you have become our teacher I shall be waiting for the day when you will have the courage to kill a python in this Umuaro. *A coward may cover the ground with his words. But when the time comes to fight he runs away* (60).

Oduche rises to the challenge and makes up his mind to kill one of the two pythons that live in his mother's hut. But instead of killing



the python he decided to lock it up in his box where it would die of suffocation. Pandemonium takes over Ezeulu's house when Oduche's box starts to move. Ezeulu breaks open the box to see an exhausted royal python. Ezeulu's critics have an occasion once again to comment on his actions. Anosi says to himself:

*'I have already said that what his new religion will bring to Umuaro wears a hat on its head.'* (55). To others he says *'what that man Ezeulu will bring to Umuaro is pregnant and nursing a baby'* (63).

Oduche's actions gives Ezeulu cause to place the blame on himself for sending him to church. It never occurs to him at the point of sending his son to join the missionary that he could be converted to their faith. In his words *'A man who brings home ant-infested faggots should not complain if he is visited by lizards'* (72).

Later in the narrative, Ezeulu's disillusionment comes, not as a result of Oduche's practice of Christianity but his disloyalty to the purpose of his being in the mission. Oduche's involvement with the missionaries continues to be a controversial issue and the natives bear a grudge against the Chief Priest for it. Popular opinion had it that if Ezeulu, with the sacred office he holds, allows his son to mingle with people that kill and eat the sacred python and those involved in other things considered as abomination in the land, he -Ezeulu- is the personified proverbial character of *'the lizard who threw confusion into his mother's funeral rite...'* and wondered if he did *'expect the outsiders to carry the burden of honoring the dead?'* (155).

Ezeulu repeats this proverb when he discovers that the church takes advantage of the Chief Priest's delay in the announcement of the new yam festival. The church offers the people indemnity against the wrath of Ulu should they harvest their yams before the sacred festival provided they bring their thanksgiving offering -yams- to the church. Ezeulu, full of grief calls on Oduche who keeps the information away from him. He reminds him of the purpose of his being exposed to the white man's ways. He dismisses Oduche from his presence utterly disappointed. He says *'Go away and rejoice that your father cannot count on you. I say go away from here, lizard that ruined his mother's funeral'* (276).



### **Akuebe as Ezeulu's Foil**

Achebe places Akuebe by Ezeulu's side the same way he places Nwaka by Ezedemili. Although the friendships are similar, they produce different types of influences. Ezedemili, the Chief priest of Idemili, prods Nwaka to challenge Ezeulu's and Ulu's authority over certain affairs in the community because of his great wealth and status in the society. It appears that Nwaka is fortified by Ezedemili and has the wherewithal to contend with Ezeulu.

Their enmity grew in the years that followed the Okperi war that they were at the point at which the Umuaro people described as 'kill and take the head' (47). Nwaka had threatened 'Ulu by reminding Ezeulu and the people of the fate of another deity that failed his people' (47). Having survived this challenge he goes a step further to defy Ulu and his priest. He boasts of his challenge and the inability of Ulu to harm him at the Idemili festival:

I returned from my sojourn. Afo passed, Nkwo passed, Eke passed, Oye passed, Afo came around again. I listened but my head did not ache; I did not feel dizzy. 'Tell me folk assembled, a man that did this, is his arm strong or not?

The people marvel at the source of Nwaka's strength. A proverbial saying of theirs suggests that their curiosity is indeed heightened '*... for when we see a little bird dancing in the middle of a pathway we must know that its drummer is in the near-by bush*' (48).

We are told that Ezedemili has a very strong influence on Nwaka and his friendship with the former '*...gradually turned him into Ezeulu's mortal enemy. One of the ways Ezedemili accomplished this is to constantly assert that in the days before Ulu the true leaders of each village were men of high titles like Nwaka*' (49) thus, feeding his ego. Akuebe and Ezeulu's friendship, on the other hand, is based on mutual respect and concern for each other. Akuebe respects the office of the Chief Priest but is still bold to confront him with issues that pertain to his role as the Chief Priest of Umuaro, his immediate family, and his community. Akuebe is portrayed as a wise man who examines issues with level-headedness and the psycho-cultural dictates of the society to



which he belongs.

He is able to assess the situation and know that Nwaka and the Priest of Idemili are jealous of Ezeulu's position and authority. Instead of being blinded by rage, he, to an extent, understands the internal crisis faced by his friend with his children and his people. His level of consciousness of political and spiritual structures of his land is evident in his dialogues with his friend. He informs him that the people are implying that Ezeulu is the cause of the trouble in Umuaro. The extent of Ezeulu's bitterness towards his enemies expresses his posture towards the people and towards the Europeans. Ezeulu in this discussion lends his voice to the internal anger upon which he constantly feeds his thoughts:

What annoys me is not that an overblown fool dangling empty testicles should forget himself because wealth entered his house by mistake; no, what annoys me is that the cowardly priest of Idemili should hide behind him and urge him on (161).

Akuebe states that the two are jealous of Ezeulu who cannot comprehend this but refutes the claim to say 'No, its not jealousy but foolishness; the kind that puts its head into the pot. But if it is jealousy, let him go on. *The fly that perches on a mound of dung may strut around as long as it likes, it cannot move the mound*' (161). Ezeulu is proved wrong and his enemies have the last say over the issues. Akuebe wants Ezeulu to re-think his position on the issues of the land and his attitude to his people, he counsels once again:

... you forget one thing that *no man can win judgment against a clan*. You may think you did in the land dispute but you are wrong. Umuaro will always say you betrayed them before the Whiteman. And they will say you are betraying them again today by sending your son to join in desecrating the land (162).

Ezeulu's proverbial retorts are preceded by a loud ringing laughter which appears to Akuebe like an 'encounter with a mad man laughing on a solitary path'(126). He reminds Akuebe that the war against Okperi brought the Europeans to Umuaro and that he is not responsible for the foreigners establishing their institutions thereafter.



Have you not heard that *when two brothers fight a stranger reaps their harvest?* (162). We showed them the way and we are still showing them. So let nobody come to me now and complain that the white man did this and did that. *The man who brings ant-infested faggots into his hut should not grumble when lizards begin to pay him a visit*' (163).

Appealing to Ezeulu on behalf of the clan, Akuebe says,

We know what we did wrong, so we can put it right again *our sages have said that a man who does not know where the rain started to beat him cannot know where he dried his body*. We are not like that we know where this rain began to fall on us ... (163).

Ezeulu interrupts him sharply; he claims that the Whiteman has not only been invited into Umuaro but that he has become an institution. Shifting the blame on the Chief Priest, he reasons, will not drive him away. Proverbially speaking, he explains the purpose for allowing his son in the midst of the Europeans:

Shall I tell you why I sent my son? *A disease that has never been seen before cannot be cured with everyday herbs...* And our fathers have told us that it may even happen to an unfortunate generation that they are pushed beyond the end of things, and their back is broken and hung over a fire when this happens they may sacrifice their own blood. *This is what our sages meant when they said that a man who has nowhere else to put his hands for support puts it on his own knee* (165).

That, he concludes, was why the patriarchs of Umuaro sacrificed one of themselves to put an end to the attack of the Abam warriors.

Towards the end of the narrative, Akuebe, with his voice of reason, warns his friend of the impending doom as he holds the entire Umuaro ransom. Akuebe is perhaps the only man in Umuaro who does not think that Ezeulu is deliberately punishing the clan. In his opinion, Ezeulu was the proverbial Nte and: ... ***a thing greater than the Nte***



**had been caught in the Nte's trap** (275). To him the situation appeared to be similar to the sayings of his ancestors '...when two brothers fight to death a stranger inherits their father's estate' (275). He sounds a final warning in Ezeulu's ear by informing him that the church was about to reap the harvest of the new yams by offering sanctuary to those who wished to escape Ulu's wrath. The Chief Priest's indifference alarms Akuebe who explores this final discussion as an avenue of persuasion before the tragedies strike.

Achebe carefully establishes a link in these dialogues, in the meditations of the Chief Priest at the beginning of the narrative and his reflections during his detention. The major issue is whether he has authority over the people as the Chief Priest of Ulu or if he is merely a watchman over the clan's affairs (3&4). Ezeulu perceives that there will be grave consequences with the prevailing circumstances in Umuaro; not for now alone but for all time the experience will afflict Umuaro like an *Ogulu-aro* disease which counts a year and returns for its victims (274).

Ezeulu has great compassion for the innocent people of Umuaro but his anger subsumes his feelings. Anger, towards his enemies and detractors, whom Ulu warns him not to avenge:

Ta! Nwanu!... Who told you that this was your own fight ... I say who told you that this was your own fight which you could arrange to suit you?...Beware don't come between my victim and me or you may receive blows not meant for you! *Do you not know what happens when two elephants fight? Go home and sleep, leave me to settle my quarrel with Idemili, who wants to destroy me so that his python can come to power, now you tell me how it concerns you. I say go home and sleep* (240-241).

Ezeulu would not heed Ulu's warning as revealed in the authorial comments and his subsequent reflections. Before leaving the Government 'heel' upon his release he boastfully replies those who congratulate him on his victory over the White man with yet another version of the proverb he uses to accuse Umuaro of insolence towards their deity:



I shall come again, but before that I want to wrestle with my people whose hand I know and also know my hand. I am going home to challenge all those who have been poking their fingers into my face to come outside their gate and meet *me in combat and whoever throws the other will strip him of his anklet.*' The challenge of Eneke ntulukpa to man, bird and beast,' said John Nwodika with childlike excitement. You know it? Said Ezeulu happily (221).

Ezeulu's victory over the Europeans has an edge of bitterness to it. He sees his detention as a tool with which he can get even with those who were challenging his authority and the people of Umuaro who ignored the fact that a priest of his caliber had been detained. Achebe portrays his fall as a result of his 'hubris' his inability to overcome anger and bitterness. The two factors drown the compassion, an attribute that is expected to accompany the office of a High Priest (12).

Obika's death speaks volumes as Ezeulu himself becomes a by-word and a proverb. He is the proverbial:

- Grass upon which two elephants clash
- Eneke Nktulupa
- A brother who fights his brethren to death while a stranger inherits their estate
- The Anita priest and deity who failed his people and was carried to the boundary of Anita and set ablaze.

Ezeulu is dazed by the outcome of his wrestling bout with his clan Ulu's warning about his meddling comes to pass: 'As for me and Idemili we shall fight to the finish; and whoever throws the other down will strip him of his anklet!' (241) In a way, Idemili strips both Ulu and his priest of their anklets, Obika's death is to Ezeulu his own death (285); his life has come to an abrupt halt.

... for Ezeulu there was no next time. Think of a man, who unlike lesser men always goes to battle without a shield because he knows that bullets and machet strokes will glance off his medicine-boiled skin, think of him discovering in the thick battle that the power has suddenly without



warning deserted him. What next time can there be? (285)

His son's death was humiliating because of the prevailing conflict in the land. *'They say a man is like a funeral ram which must take whatever beating comes to it without opening mouth; only the silent tremor of his pain down its body tells of its suffering'* (286). He would have been more than equal to the tragic loss of Obika were it not compounded with the humiliation of the prevailing situation in the land. Proverbial questions haunted the Priest's mind. *'Why...why had Ulu chosen to deal thus with him to strike him down and cover him with mud? What was his offence?'* (186)

*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 own son with a potsherd to bring fire from a neighbor's hut and then unleash rain on him?) Whoever sent his son up the palm to gather nuts and then took an axe and felled the tree? (286)*

From one point of view, one can ask, who is the proverbial lizard: Ezeulu or Oduche? Again who is the proverbial brave man whose house is in ruins: is it Ezeulu or Obika? One has cause to believe that the people of Umuaro do not employ the didactic values their proverbs teach but engage in the rhetoric of the form. Nwaka we are told is respected for his oratory and is able to sway people's opinion with his great speeches, which were interspersed with proverbial sayings and not necessarily sound reasoning. Ezeulu has since his childhood lived in the fear of moments when his mother's insanity was at its peak especially *'...when his mother's feet were put in stocks, at the new moon'* (278). He becomes demented fulfilling the sayings of Nwaka and a few others who say he acts as though he had *'...caught his mother's madness'*.

### ***Proverbialism and Ogbazulobodo the Spirit of Death***

According to the Umuaro tradition, *Ogbazulobodo*, a night spirit, runs before a man's final burial. A fully costumed spirit, *Ogbazulobodo*, moves with great speed, and chants proverbs as incantations heralding the final passage of a dead one. Once the spirit is invoked, it vanishes *'like the wind... leaving potent words in the air behind'* (282). The



proverbial incantations chanted at top speed are laced with the religious, cultural and philosophical, and psychological beliefs of the people.

- *The fly that struts around on a mount of excrement wastes its time; the mount will always be higher than the fly.*
- *The thing that beats the drum for ngwesi is inside the ground.*
- *Darkness is so great it gives horns to a dog.*
- *He who built a homestead before another can boast of more broken pots.*
- *The man who walks ahead his fellows spots the spirit on the way.*
- *Bat said he knew his ugliness and chose to fly by night.*
- *Even while people are still talking about the man a rat bit to death, lizard takes money to have his teeth filled.*
- *He who sees an old hag squatting should leave her alone, who knows how she breathes.*
- *He who will swallow udala seeds must consider the size of his anus (282).*
- *... when a hand shake passes the elbow it becomes another thing.*
- *The sleep that lasts from one market day to another has become death.*
- *A common snake which a man sees all alone may become a python in his eyes.*
- *The very thing which kills mother rat is always there to make sure that its young ones never open their eyes.*
- *The boy who persists in asking what happened to his father before he has enough strength to avenge him is asking for his father's fate.*
- *The man who belittles the sickness which monkey has suffered should ask to see the eyes which he got from blowing the sick fire.*
- *When death wants to take a little dog it prevents it from smelling even excrement...(283).*

A chorus of male singers, *ayaka*, remains at the *ilo* to welcome the spirit which runs through the six villages. Unfortunately in this case, the carrier, *Obika*, re-enters the *ilo*, collapses and dies. Significant as



this death is to Umuaro, Achebe uses the medium of the spirit of death and Obika's participation in this cult to further reinforce the relevance and the significance of proverbs to the Igbo people. Several of the proverbs have themes of death and one wonders if it had anything to do with the carrier's death. The most striking significance of these proverbial incantations is that it teaches values such as wisdom, the benefits of unity, and moderation. It gives a mysterious air to the belief pattern of the people of Umuaro. Achebe brilliantly captures this from diverse perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

Achebe in his article 'The novelist as a Teacher' (1973) discusses his role as a writer in African society. He states:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels especially the ones set in the past did no more than teach my readers that their past -with all its imperfections- was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them (Cited in Dasylva, 1994: 139).

Achebe's approach to colonial and postcolonial challenges in Nigeria remain a great treasure to African literature and history. He fulfills the role of a teacher in many ways and a major tool he has employed to achieve this in this novel is in the use of proverbs. Whenever and wherever proverbs are used in the right context they are found relevant in probing into the psyche, cultural values and culture of a people. A study of Achebe's use of proverbs reveal how the entirety of the Igbo cultural values is adapted to the day-to-day conflict and situation of the Umuaro people.

Lady Kofo Ademola's compilations of African Proverbs confirm the universality of themes, precepts, and cultural values amongst African countries. Ironic is the fact that the people of Umuaro are destroyed because they will not heed the ancient counsel of their proverbs which they quote over and over again. The answers to the questions that Ezeulu's mind is unable to provide lie within the precepts, themes and forms of the proverbs he and the members of his clan use as incantation,



history and oratory.

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