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'The World is Like a Mask Dancing': Exploring Pluralist Paradigms of History in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*

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In his famous book, Reading the African Novel, Simon Gikandi underlines the formal strategies adopted by Chinua Achebe in his celebrated African trilogy and more specifically in his historical novels, Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God. However, Gikandi opts for a naturalistic dimension in Arrow of God, by suppressing to some extent, the mythico-religious dimension of the text, claiming, "conflicts in Umuaro are not a rivalry between the two gods Ulu and Idemili but actually a struggle between two conflicting ideological interests and authorities" (p.153) represented by Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu and Nwaka, his adversary. Speaking generally, the 'demythification' at work in Gikandi's analysis could be helpful for other purposes, but in viewing myth within the repertoire of the Igbo system of knowledge, such an attempt necessarily turns futile. For notions of history and myth are intrinsically bound up within Igbo epistemology, and in most cases there is no distinction between the two.

In this paper, I will deal at length, with Hayden White's conception of 'history as narrative' and its chief implication, the emergence of pluralist paradigms of history, both across and within cultures. I will then proceed to analyse Achebe's Arrow of God (1964) as a novel projecting such historical pluralism that essentially debunks the absolutism of classicist historiography and its inseparable twin brother, colonialist rhetoric.

In his book Metahistory (1975), Hayden White broadly formulated his concept of 'history as narrative' as a set of "coherent and ordered representation of events or developments in sequential time." (White). All historical explanations therefore have the rhetorical 'tropes' of fiction.

These tropes were identified by White as (a) metaphor (b) metonymy (c) synecdoche and (d) irony. The 'narrativity' of history, according to White, also broadly conformed to literary genres of particular types, namely: (a) Romance (b) Tragedy (c) Comedy and (d) Satire.

In another essay named 'Historical Pluralism' (White, Historical Pluralism), White dismissed notions of any *one* "legitimate perspective on history" to a historical pluralist. Citing a critical debate between Wayne Booth and M.H. Abrams on the subject, White concludes that while Abrams and Booth differ on the extent to which historical pluralism can be stretched, for both of them "there is a single truth to be revealed, because in history things happened as they did and not otherwise"(p.484). For White, an argument accepting the validity of historical pluralism and yet limiting it within certain rigid boundaries is self-defeating; for him, "historical pluralism presupposes a number of equally plausible accounts of the historical past, or alternatively, a number of different but equally meaningful constructions of that indeterminate field of past occurrences which by convention we call 'history'". Further, in accordance with the conformity of historical narrative to definite literary genres, White proposed fixed *modes of emplotment* to express them, stating that "certain sets of historical events are intrinsically tragic, comic, epic or farcical in nature and that, therefore they will

admit of *one* and *only one mode of emplotment* for the truthful representation of their real meaning.". (p.485).

The overall implications of White's formulations are numerous. Since historical narratives are viewed as consisting of the tropes of fiction, they are as much 'invented' as 'found' in the past.[**i**] (White, Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism)**.** Proceeding from empirically validated 'facts' or 'events', the historian manipulates his contents in an imaginative space to allow them to take their position within a coherent story. This process of emplotment entails the selection/omission of certain historical events within the narrative, limiting the 'truth' of such accounts.

"The project of history fails", writes White, "if it intends to present an objective reconstruction of the past", because, "the process involved is the literary one of interpretative nature, rather than objective empiricism [or] social theorizing." (Munslow)**.** Thus the pluralist conception of history serves as an antithesis to the canon of classicist historiography emerging in the 19th century and of which, Hegel is the pioneer. Its absolutism and its attempts to search for "truth" is the typical outcome of a Western ethnocentric, (but disguised as 'universal') hegemonic worldview, prioritizing science and rationalism over myth and imagination; using such epistemological tools to justify the "use and abuse of power and authority"**.** (Gilderhus)**.** An inseparable extension of classicist historiography thus, manifests itself enduringly within the rhetoric of colonialism.

Writing in the decade of the 1950s at the wake of nationalist struggles in Africa, Achebe himself identified this 'universality complex' among critics of the Western canon. He writes:

"In the nature of things the work of a Western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it…I should like to see the word 'universal' banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world." (Achebe)

Arrow of God, Achebe's third novel, foregrounds the divergence and multiplicity of historical perspectives; negating possibilities of absolute histriographic control. This is best summed up by Ezeulu's advice to his son Oduche in Chapter Four:

"The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place." (pp. 45-46)[**ii**]

The novel projects a number of rival (and therefore, equally plausible) accounts of 'historical' (read quasi-mythical) events in the Igbo community, with its chief emphasis on the village of Umuaro. A crucial incident in the novel is the war between Umuaro and Okperi over a disputed piece of farmland. Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, is firmly against Umuaro going to war, because he thinks what he knows to be the 'truth':

"…when our village first came to live the land belonged to Okperi. It was Okperi who gave us a piece of their land to live in." (p. 15)

The basis and validation of this 'truth' for Ezeulu lay in the fact that he had heard the story from his father. However, such an account is disputed by his rival Nwaka, a powerful titled man in Umuaro, who wants war:

"We know that a father does not speak falsely to his son. But we also know the lore of the land is beyond the knowledge of many fathers…Ezeulu speaks of events which are older than Umuaro itself…My father told me a different story." (p. 16)

To complicate matters further, even the version of the colonialist officer T.K. Winterbottom is not excluded:

"This war between Umuaro and Okperi began in a rather interesting way…this was started because a man from Umuaro went to visit a friend in Okperi one fine morning and after he'd had one or two gallons of palm wine…reached for his *ikenga* and split it in two." (p. 37)

Similar rhetorical strategies from the author are seen in the (hi)stories surrounding the origin of the famous Eke Okperi market. Akukalia explains to his companions that the prosperity of Eke grew after the people of Okperi "made a powerful deity and placed their market in its care" (p.19). This is the deity Nwanyieke, an old woman who dances in the open marketplace every Eke day before cock-crow. Ironically, one of his companions reveals that, "they tell the same story of the Nkwo market beside the great river at Umuru." (p. 37), to which Akukalia objects that the reason the Nkwo market has grown is because the white man took his merchandise there. This is immediately met with a further challenge from his companions: "Why did he take his merchandise there; if not because of their medicine?" (p. 19)

Achebe refrains from providing the right answer because in the Igbo conception of history, there is no *one* right answer. And this brings us to the novel's central problem, called by Ambreena Manji as "the problem of knowing" (Manji). "Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own"(p. 16)—goes the indigenous Igbo proverb. To illustrate it the author deliberately "sow[s] the "seeds of disorder by admitting into the novel the existence of an infinite range of normative possibilities." (Arthurs)

A classic example of the tyranny of classicist historiography is presented in the novel in the book The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger by the colonialist chronicler George Allen.[**iii**] **.**A typical passage quoted in the novel exhorts the British colonialist, urging him on to conquer native lands:

"Shall it be the Little Englander for whom the Norman fought the Saxon on his field? Was it for him the archers bled at Crecy and Poitiers, or Cromwell drilled his men…No, no, a thousand times no! The British race will take its place, the British blood will tell." (p. 33)

What is notable here are the repeated references to historical times and places, landmark events in the history of the Britons. Now, a specimen from Achebe's rendition of the history of the Igbo community will illustrate a difference:

"In the very distant past, when lizards were still few and far between –Umuachala, Umuchala, Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezeani, Umugwugwu and Umuisiuzo—lived as different peoples and each worshipped its own deity…Things were so bad for the six villages that their leaders…fixed a strong team of medicine men to install a common deity…called Ulu…" (pp. 14-15).

No perceptible difference exists here between history and communal myth; the 'chronotopic'[**iv**] dimensions of objective empiricism have eluded this narrative altogether.

The events of a "very distant past" could encompass a narrative of fifty, hundred, two hundred years or even the beginning of time. Individual members of the community will doubtless have innumerable variants of the same story, creating a body of myth which will define communal identity in Umuaro, and be orally transmitted across generations. It is also significant how the nature of time conceived in the Igbo consciousness is fundamentally different from a linear chronological Western historical paradigm. Neil Ten Kortenaar describes how references to time in the Igbo community "are to seasons, to moons, to weeks, and to time that has passed since memorable events occurred. There is no calendar measuring an absolute scale, for such calendars are the product of literate societies. Instead, time is cyclical, observing the recurrence of the seasons and the market days." (Kortenaar).

Kortenaar further uses Levi-Strauss' theoretical propositions to analyze the role of ritual in Igbo society, where past and present are joined in myth "because nothing has been going on since the appearance of the ancestors except events whose recurrence periodically effaces their particularity." (Levi-Strauss). Thus, Ezeulu's Mask-dancing is the attempt of an oral community to literally "re-create" the past, "the First Coming of Ulu", whose power and origins is recapitulated with a ritual reenactment. (p. 69-72).

The dynamic instability of perspectives in the novel has been argued intensively by McDougall who examined the 'complex kinetics' of the novel 'in terms of mode', pointing out that "the hermeneutic principle of Arrow of God is one of fluid movement from one position to another…" (McDougall)**.** It must be remembered though that the historical pluralism of the novel is at best a part, a subset of its overall design of fluidity.

The imprisonment of the Python, sacred to Idemili, in Oduche's wooden box is an episode which serves as a metonymic example of the all-engulfing logic of absolutism thrust forward by colonialist rhetoric. In this case, the body of power is the Christian Church, an inescapable right hand of the 'white man's burden' across the globe. The slithering Sacred Python could serve as a metaphor for the changeability in perspectives [**v**] available in the Igbo epistemology, which is fettered and stifled within the rigid box of colonial control**.[vi]** In this context, it is the first convert of Umuaro, Moses Unachukwu, who challenges such absolutism, embodied in the teacher Mr. Goodcountry, by making a variety of cultural perspectives; he anticipates the issue of historical pluralism himself:

"Mr. Goodcountry's teaching about the sacred python gave Moses the first opportunity to challenge him openly. To do this he used not only the Bible but, strangely enough for a convert, the myths of Umuaro…He told the new teacher quite bluntly that neither the Bible nor the catechism asked converts to kill the python, a beast full of ill omen."(pp. 47-48).

Moses adeptly assimilates both of the cultural influences he is subject to, manipulating them to allow for a multitude of historical standpoints available in the Igbo community. He never rejects the Christian canon, but skillfully evades certain aspects of it to suit his own people. This assimilation averts the hegemonic view of religious superiority of Mr. Goodcountry who uses the innocence and naïveté of Oduche, a child, to allude to Moses' arguments as "heathen filth" (p. 49). Achebe skilfully mimics the ceremonious, formal language of the Bible to subvert Goodcountry's appraisal of Oduche's intellect to justify his militant gesture of religious acquisition:

"The world will pass away but not one single word of Our Lord will be set aside…When the

time comes for your baptism you will be called Peter; on this rock will I build my Church." (p. 49)

Granting the existence of multiple historical perspectives within the novel, we still have a problem. What rhetorical trope(s) does the grand-narrative of the dissolution of pre-colonial Igbo life (put forward by Achebe) employ? Which literary genre then, following White's model of narrative histories, does it emulate?

The frequently used rhetorical trope in the novel is almost certainly, irony. It is used to accompany almost all possible referents of colonialism—Winterbottom's well-intentioned benign paternalism, his claim to have turned into a hardened 'coaster', acclimatized to African conditions, the self-defeating policy of 'indirect rule' by the British administration by appointing chefs to govern an 'acephalous'[**vii**] community that naturally lacked leaders and its manifestation in the perversions of Chief James Okedi, to name a few. And all of this, of course, is backed up by the overtly ironic portrayal of the 'white man's burden' to "lead the backward races to line" (p.33) and 'pacifying' them with an imposed history of European racial supremacy.

The effects of such an imposition lead to the terminal dissolution of the Igbo community in Umuaro, and the grand-narrative of such degeneration assumes the specific literary genre of tragedy. Such a tragedy is manifested in Ezeulu's powerlessness in his position as head-priest by the end of the novel, the throng of helpless Igbos with their offerings of yam at the feet of the Christian God to save their harvest, the crumbling traditional order and the "sweet agony of the solitary singer", singing in the voice of the Royal Python in Ezeulu's desolate, yet poignant dream (p.222):

"I was born when lizards were in ones and twos
A child of Idemili. The difficult tear-drops
Of Sky's first weeping drew my spots. Being
Sky-born I walked the earth with royal gait
And mourners saw me coiled across their path.
But of late
A strange bell
Has been ringing a song of desolation:
Leave your yams and cocoyams
And come to school
And I must scuttle away in haste
When children in play or in earnest cry:
"Look! A Christian is on the way.
Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha…"

[i] The 'invented/found' binary had been introduced first in White's Metahistory and has been the subject of much heated debate in postmodern historiography. See also Georg G. Iggers. Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge ,Hanover NH USA: University Press of New England, 1997, 10.

[ii] The simile of Mask-dancing, as used by Ezeulu, is intended to communicate the need to move on with the changed times, while the traditional Igbo community is threatened with dissolution by the rising, dominant power of British colonial rule. However, from an authorial perspective, I believe the simile very effectively brings out the issue of historical pluralism in the novel.

[iii] The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger is the same book the District Commissioner had thought of writing by the end of Things Fall Apart. Arrow of God, depicting the Igbo society about two decades later, identifies him as George Allen, one of the earliest colonial officers in Nigeria who has composed some sort of a handbook for succeeding British officers like Winterbottom and Clarke about how to 'deal' effectively with their natives.

[iv] I have used the Bakhtinian term as an adjective here to describe the spatio-temporal matrix, which governs the base-conditions of any narrative.

[v]The power of this image is central to the novel's overall structure; and an index to understand the extent of its influence would be to look at the cover illustrations of most editions of Arrow of God where it is represented.

[vi] Changeability in perspectives is intrinsic to the Igbo way of life. Most Igbo proverbs have an opposite, and therefore equally valid way to look at events of everyday life. Abdul Jan Mohamed explains this inherent 'double-consciousness' in terms of Achebe's "syncretism originating from writing about a culture which itself did not know writing."

[vii] Various researchers including Tejumola Olaniyan, Mark Mathuray, Ambreena Manji and others have described the traditional Igbo community as 'acephalous' (literally 'headless'). For a general description of acephalous Igbo communities, see Axel-Harneit Sievers, , 'Igbo Traditional Rulers: Chieftaincy and the State in South-eastern Nigeria',
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