

Appropriating Writing in Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God

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This paper examines the appropriation of writing as an integral part of the colonial encounter in Achebe's Arrow of God (1964). Achebe's hero (Ezeulu) realizes the pitfalls of orality in the confrontation with Europeans who are equipped with writing and its accompaniments. The coming of the West is therefore welcomed as Ezeulu quickly sides with them to empower himself against the contending forces of a disintegrating society. I argue that, as the Chief Priest of Ulu, Ezeulu is aware of the flaws in the oral nature of his religious pantheon and by sending his son Oduche to learn the art of writing he appropriates the technology of writing in order to prevail against his enemies and ineluctably allows his god's surrender to the Christian God. This absorption into a greater pantheon is facilitated through the appropriation of writing and the sacred book.

Keywords

Orality; writing; appropriation; postcoloniality; Achebe; *Arrow of God*

The question of language has embattled postcolonial criticism on Africa and the debate on the use of Western languages is a beaten track. Engagements with writing, that is, with the concept of writing as an essential part of a progressive society have been commented upon only incidentally. In this paper, I propose the argument that the absence of writing in Africa, south of the Sahara, is a concept rarely seen in fiction. Douglas Killam and Ruth Rowe have intimated this absence of writing in pre-colonial Africa and the derogatory stigma that ensues as a result when they argue that

The study of writing systems in Africa have been impeded by certain prejudices about the nature of writing. This narrow definition of writing has effectively denied the existence of any indigenous systems of writing in sub-Saharan Africa. (307)

Although they are here refuting the idea that Africa was without systems of writing, their argument falls short of alluding to particular systems of writing as we know them.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin have commented on the ubiquitous character of writing as possibly the most important element in the colonial encounter. Writing enabled the systematic subjugation of the colonial subjects on the one hand and empowered resistance against the colonialists on the other hand. Writing, therefore, takes up a central position in the dialectics that informs the postcolonial experience. As they argue:

In many post-colonial societies, it was not the English language that had the greatest effect, but writing itself. ... the seizing of the means of communication and the liberation of post-colonial writing by the appropriation of the written word become crucial features of the process of self-assertion and the ability to reconstruct the world as an unfolding historical process. (81)

The colonial subjects were quick to learn that the appropriation of writing was mandatory not only for their liberation but also for their full participation in a world where writing was important because it enabled the dissemination of other forms of discourse.

John Marx in “Postcolonial Literature and the Western Literary Canon” comments on this capacity to appropriate in *Arrow of God* when he writes: “It is not difficult to locate texts that define themselves through both their difference from the Western canon and their appropriation of its techniques. Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, for instance, exemplifies both relationships” (83-84). While agreeing with Marx that the novel engages with the appropriation of writing, I argue that although the cultural canvas on which the novel is set is definitely African, the ideological struggle in the novel actually reveals an authorial avowal of the West and an indictment of African orality. Achebe portrays the absence of writing among the Ibo as a determining factor in their subjugation.

I refer to writing not as a tool of a given language but as an accompaniment to speech. My concern is with writing as a means of recording experience and minimizing the pitfalls of orality. Ezeulu is mesmerized upon beholding writing not because he is aware of the importance of the English language as such but because he notices the power that the technology of writing may provide him as a custodian of tradition. In his legendary deconstruction of

the speech/writing binary in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida takes on the notion of writing as a “supplement” to speech, arguing that a “supplement” is actually something that fills in a lack in something else – therefore writing, in a sense, supplements speech only because speech must be lacking in something. That writing might have been developed in some areas before others explain the reasons why lettered cultures have had political and economic ascendancy over non-lettered cultures.

Achebe opens *Arrow of God* with a conflict pitting two very important forces in Umuaro. Like his famous novel *Things Fall Apart*, he presents an African society deeply split and on the verge of collapse. The governing institutions are breaking down because of ideological and personal ambitions. This conflict is primarily between Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu, and Ezidemili, the Chief Priest of Idemili. Ulu is the principal deity of Umuaro while Idemili is the principal deity of Umuneora (the most powerful village in the union). This is explained anthropologically that in coming together to create a deity that would unite them and make them invincible against their enemy, the Abam, the six villages that makeup Umuaro decided to give the high position of Chief Priest of Ulu to the weakest among the six villages in order to create a balance of power. As the Priest of Ezidemili, a personal deity of the strongest village, Idemili uses Nwaka to confront and undermine the supremacy of Ezeulu. The tussle that results from this feud involves each party seeking the dismantlement of the other and plunging the union into a complex imbroglio. Ezeulu allies with the colonial forces to ward off the assault of his adversaries. He manages this through the appropriation of writing and thus fulfils the demands of the god he serves and still negotiates personal ambitions.

The denouement in *Arrow of God* is analogous to that in *Things Fall Apart* in the sense that Christianity and European ideologies overshadow African traditional beliefs. At the end of both novels the technology of writing subordinates orality. In *Things Fall Apart* Christianity and its allying institutions dominate because of the promise of real power; economically, politically but also in the espousal of human rights. *Arrow of God* foregrounds writing and its appropriation as an expediency in building a level battleground. The power of Ezeulu is partly his ability in dealing with the conflicts but more importantly the fact that he is ineluctably obeying the dictates of his deity to whom he simply is a messenger – an arrow in the bow of Ulu.

The conflict emanates from the culture’s primary oral nature. The dearth in the representation of historical and mythological events permitted the falsification of important hallmarks in the society’s evolution. To resolve

this conflict, Ezeulu embraces writing and the ideologies consequent on it. His appropriation of writing is not to negate the values of the primarily oral culture but to enhance it. His power over his people and his enemies would tremendously be enhanced if his deity is represented in writing or replaced by a deity that is represented in writing. The course of events, however, does not empower him literally ipso facto; rather the preponderance of Christian piety eclipses him and the god he stubbornly chooses to serve. And yet, he is not merely destroyed. Udoche's meteoric rise within the ranks of the new religion seen in his imprisonment of the sacred python and therefore hastening the destruction of Ulu is not destruction as such but a synthesis; Christians still have to take their yams to a god, only this time it is not Ulu but the Christian God that has absorbed Ulu. The arrogance of the Chief Priest is actually obedience to a design that permits the surrender of an unlettered deity into the canopy of a lettered deity protected by a sacred text. And so Ezeulu, struck by this higher calling, reminisces: "Why had Oduche imprisoned a python in his box? It had been blamed on the white man's religion, but was that the true cause? What if the boy was also an arrow in the hand of Ulu?" (*AOG* 192). This quote goes a long way to suggest that Ezeulu's admiration for the white man is motivated by the god he is serving. Ulu is asking his Priest to embrace the sacred book, something that Oduche embraces with perspicacity. This is urgent because as Ashcroft et al argue: "Thus literacy leads to the development of historic consciousness. It allows scrutiny of a fixed past. It enables distinctions to be made between truth and error ..." (80). This dialectical structure in the novel is beautifully resolved at the end. African religion confronts Christianity and the ensuing merger of the two into a synthesis becomes evident. The resolution of the clash is facilitated by wonder at the literacy of the European and taking possession of it. Now, this is seen in some of the minor conflicts that are operative.

One of the minor conflicts in the novel is the filial relationship between Ezeulu and his sons. Edogo, Ezeulu's eldest son is considered a weakling, while Obika, a foolhardy son is the favourite. And yet neither of them are to succeed the father as chief priest. They have two younger brothers – Oduche and Nwafor. Nwafor as the youngest of the sons is closest to the father and privy to the father's ritual incantations; many already believe he is destined to be the father's successor. As it turns out though, the chief Priest never knows his own successor; the god Ulu decides when the time comes. When Ezeulu sends Oduche to learn the white man's knowledge Edogo interprets it as the former disqualifying the latter for priesthood in this reminiscence: "Could it

be that the father had deliberately sent Oduche to the religion of the white man so as to disqualify him for the priesthood of Ulu?" (*AOG* 91-92). Edego fails to comprehend the forces behind his father's actions because as it turns out Ezeulu's successor may not be Nwafor but Oduche. Oduche is sent to study the white man's knowledge (here symbolized by writing) to rise up to the challenges that must be confronted in the future only by recourse to the new arsenal. This paradigm is also observable in the father-son dialectics in *Things Fall Apart* when Nwoye defects to Christianity because of the irrational and inhuman customs in African traditions. Oduche's imprisonment of the sacred python does not lead to his chastisement but to his spiritual growth very much like Nwoye's avowal of Christianity in *Things Fall Apart*. The proselytizing power of Christianity is enhanced by this audacious subordination of the sacred python and therefore reducing Idemili and his cronies. This incident further widens the rift that becomes irreparable as it dwarfs the latter and paradoxically raises the former. Ezeulu's ally is equipped with a sacred book that sanctions the killing of the snake – the culprit responsible for the onus of mankind's sin. Oduche makes recourse to the scriptures in the controversy over the fate of the python and this is evidenced in the appropriation of writing as power: "It is not true that the Bible does not ask us to kill the serpent. Did not God tell Adam to crush its head after it had deceived his wife?" (*AOG* 49). Oduche's perspicacity is here seen as he stretches out to embrace the power that is evident not only in the religious piety he now shares but also in political and economic terms.

Greenblatt suggests that this power may be explained in "... the Christians' conviction that they possessed an absolute and exclusive religious truth..." (9). The heated confrontation that ensues between the two Priests, as a result, is not unexpected. Ezeulu is purged as a result of this encounter as we read in this very significant dialogue between him and Nwafor. The children are outside scaring away the sacred python and their father hears them and inquires the meaning of their utterances.

'What were you saying?'

Nwafor said nothing. His eyelids blinked almost audibly.

'Are you deaf? I asked you what you were saying.'

'They said that is how you scare away a python.'

'I did not ask you what anybody said. I asked what you were saying. Or do you want me to get up from here before you answer?'

'We were saying: Python, run! There is a Christian here.'

‘And what does it mean?’

‘Akwuba told us that a python runs away as soon as it hears that.’

Ezeulu broke into a long, loud laughter. Nwafor’s relief beamed all over his grimy face.

‘Did it run away when you said it?’

‘It ran away *fiam* like an ordinary snake.’ (AOG 204-5)

This passage shows that Ezeulu is subconsciously converting to Christianity. His compound is rapidly being transformed from the temple of the god Ulu to a Christian location. The sacred python that was once revered is now denigrated because it has lost significance. By having power over the python, Ezeulu is taking the upper hand over Nwaka and the Priest Ezidemili who supports him but by allying with the West he is also losing ground as he paradoxically loses relevance as a custodian of culture and religion. Moses Unachukwu, the Christian preacher, succinctly puts it thus: “as daylight chases away darkness so will the white man drive away all our customs” (AOG 84). The result is that both priests and their deities will increasingly lose their relevance to the elation of Ezeulu who triumphs by crossing carpets.

One major element in this process of appropriation is Ezeulu’s incongruous character. Achebe makes him serve his authorial intention by serving as a mediator between the feuding clans, and by so doing, he permits the installation of the colonial regents who fill the space left by the rift of war. Ezeulu’s testimony in the conflict between Umuaro and Okperi suggests that he is plotted to serve as a bridge not just between the neighbouring clans but the transitions of time. As both member and outsider in the sense that he belongs to both clans, his support for Okperi fuels the conflict to unprecedented heights ushering in the white man who befriends him. This factor is very important in the sense that Ezeulu’s two-month absence from his sacred role is explained by his detention in Okperi, making his membership in Okperi even more symbolic. His maternal lineage runs strong in his blood given the association between the madness of his mother and the ultimate madness he suffers. Achebe may be making analogies here between madness and wisdom like in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Achebe’s tendency to connect his protagonists and their mothers are also seen in *Things Fall Apart* when Okonkwo is exiled to his motherland for seven years. This paradigmatic structure is a recurrent trope in Achebe’s plots enabling him to decentre heroes and bring about changes that would otherwise have been improbable. Ezeulu’s two months of imprisonment in his motherland complicates the crisis and takes

it to unexpected levels. This return to the mother serves as a trope for his hastening demise dragging down his god and all that represent it. According to Cirlot, “Mother-symbols are characterized by an interesting ambivalence: the mother sometimes appears as the image of nature, and vice versa; but the Terrible Mother is a figure signifying death” (218). Ezeulu’s “death” however is not oblivion but a continuation in the sense that he and his god are absorbed into a greater pantheon. His incarceration empowers him in his resolve to take revenge on his enemies and the folks that are swayed by their intrigue and to leap over the maze of conflict embattling him. This incarceration in his mother’s land is an oxymoron as he dies to be reborn: bringing him great joy and enabling his rebirth and empowerment. His nightmare while in confinement confirms this death and resurrection:

That night Ezeulu saw in a dream a big assembly of Umuaro elders, the same people he had spoken to a few days earlier. But instead of himself it was his grandfather who rose up to speak to them. They refused to listen. Then the people seized the Chief Priest who had changed from Ezeulu’s grandfather to himself and began to push him from one group to another. Some spat on his face and called him the priest of a dead god. (*AOG* 159)

This dream signals his ascent into a new experience; the death of Ulu is a transformation as Ulu is absorbed into Christianity. From this point onwards Ezeulu uses the white man as an ally against his enemies who are reluctant to follow the tides of events; his victory is not personal but collective. His prison experience raises him to an almost equal footing with the white man whom he now employs against his enemy (*AOG*, 176).

Ezeulu is sometimes only vaguely aware of the greater force commanding and propelling him. As a member of the least powerful of the clans but occupying the most important function, the hero is aware of the tides against him. He is disadvantaged and must do everything in his power to keep the privileged station he occupies. His family and clan must stay ahead of the rest and lead them in the future as in the past. Such supremacy is enabled by the capacity to write. When summoned by Mr. Clarke, Ezeulu is fascinated by the art of writing. On beholding Clarke writing with his left hand: “the first thought that came to Ezeulu on seeing him was to wonder whether any black man could ever achieve the same mastery over the book as to write it with the left hand” (*AOG*, 173). Ezeulu’s wonder as he beholds the art of writing is an act of appropriation. The white man has conquered his nation and he

must attenuate the defeat by becoming a member of the nascent nation. This amazement is explained by Greenblatt thus:

Someone witnesses something amazing, but what matters takes place not 'out there' or along the receptive surfaces of the body where the self encounters the world, but deep within, at the vital, emotional centre of the witness. (17)

Confronted with the prospect of real power, Ezeulu sacrifices his position to allow his son the opportunity to master writing and therefore ascend to the echelons of power in the new dispensation: "I want you to learn and master this man's knowledge so much that if you are suddenly woken up from sleep and asked what it is you will reply. You must learn it until you can write it with your left hand" (*AOG* 189-90).

His son Oduche is his anointed successor; Ulu is seeking its own replacement by inviting its destruction just like Jesus brings the New Testament to renew the Old. This is seen when his god warns Ezeulu against personalizing the fight: "I say who told you that this was your own fight to arrange the way it suits you?" (*AOG* 191). Ezeulu is disburdened of the onus weighing heavily on him brought about by the prevalence of discordant narratives of orality. He is relieving himself and passing the responsibility on to his son, who by mastering writing must be empowered and bear the burden. Oduche deciphers European ciphers and frees his people from the discordance of orality. His gambit is a systematic appropriation of the other – a panacea healing his culture from amnesia. The complacency undergirding his oral culture must be treated as a disease and writing is a cure.

This disease is evident in discrepant versions of sacred history that troubled the society. The society in the novel is primarily oral leading to difficulties in explicating complicated narratives. Appropriating writing defies the confusion that a primarily oral culture enabled. Greenblatt holds the view that colonization operated through the accuracy of written texts. Colonized territories were often cultures without writing and whose grip on observation was paltry (11). Ezeulu can bring the stranger into focus and reach out for the same arsenal that shatters his society. By sending his son to study the art of writing, he anoints his successor. Ezeulu is rapidly losing his authority because of discordant accounts in narratives that are expedient to the solidarity of his people and embraces the colonialists in order to prevail. This is also true of Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*; here the indelible substance of writing is contrasted

with the ephemerality of orality when the catechist shows the advantages of writing over orality:

Obi heard his father talk with deep feeling about the mystery of the written word to an illiterate kinsman: We see it today in the writing of the white man. If you go to the native courts and look at the books which clerks wrote twenty years ago or more, they are still as they wrote them. (115)

Given that Achebe's first three novels are widely considered a trilogy underscores the centrality of writing in the plots. Obi's father is actually Nwoye in *Things Fall Apart*, the estranged son of the protagonist Okonkwo. Obi, the grandson of Okonkwo is encouraged to master writing and its accoutrements in order to rise to the demands of a society that has moved from an oral to a written one.

Three significant instances in *Arrow of God* deserve to be brought into focus to visualize this urgency to appropriate writing and therefore permit a greater opportunity to bring the enemy into focus. First, the lack of writing in the narrative is shown where elders are split over what should be done on issues of expediency. Recourse to illogical testimonies is the only authenticating sign the orators use in argumentation. A look at such discrepant accounts in the novel can help shed light on this flaw in the society. Disputing the war choice with their neighbour Okperi, Ezeulu has no document to prove his point that the war is unjust but his father's word: "My father said this to me that when 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. If you choose to fight a man for a piece of farmland that belongs to him I shall have no hand in it" (*AOG* 15). In an oral culture, the lack of writing means that the memory of the society is very short, permitting few authenticating texts except word-of-mouth accounts and giving the utterance "My father told me" considerable power. But this authenticating process is violently compromised when there are discrepant accounts as evidenced in Nwaka's response to Ezeulu: "My father told me a different story. He told me that Okperi people were wanderers" (*AOG* 16). The result of this impasse is that Umuaro goes to war without the blessing of their priest. This leads to disaster as the white man steps in and gives the disputed territory to Okperi basing part of the decision on Ezeulu's testimony. And thus the proverb that when two brothers fight a stranger reaps the harvest comes to pass. More importantly, the failure of Nwaka and his war expedition suggests that Ezeulu's account of history is the more authentic

given his proximity to the deity. It is my view that in order to avoid such misunderstandings in the future Ezeulu embraces writing as an expediency to replace the flaws of an oral tradition.

The second important factor is what the hero garners from sending his son, Udoche, to learn the white man's knowledge. Ezeulu sends his son to learn the art of writing, permitting the latter to imprison the sacred python – the proselyte's violation of custom complicates the feud between Ezeulu and Ulu on the one hand and Ezidimili and Idimili on the other hand. Undergirding this debacle is the influence of the Bible as a trope for literacy and the lettered world. Oduche's imprisonment of the sacred python is the apex of the conflict, accompanied by his father's two-month absence and a hiatus in the calendar year leading to famine consequent to the postponement of the new yam festival and the harvest. These two concomitant factors are the resolution to the conflict; the father fails his adherents who by fleeing to the Christian church for succour are actually embracing the son whose perspicacity is rewarded in the new dispensation.

This fact is closely connected with the third: the symbolic demise of orality in the Ulu pantheon. By embracing writing, the hero is undermining that part of him that must be sacrificed. His favourite son, Obika, is a strong traditionalist. We see this in several episodes where he is indispensable to traditional rituals performed to enhance the society's sense of belief and cohesion. And yet he must be sacrificed as his younger brother ascends the ladder of Western culture. One son rises to the calling of the new god and the other dies in a juju ceremony suggesting the demise of the old order and the dawn of a new era. Oduche's intention in killing the python is his wish to destroy all African religious practices thereby prefiguring Obika's death.

The reconciling power in Ezeulu's sojourn cannot be overlooked as his psychological transformation has far-reaching effects. His incarceration brings him closer to those who are embracing the white man's knowledge. His contact with Nwodika is witness to the reconciliatory potential in colonization. Never had it been imagined that a son of Ummunneora would play host to a man of Umuachala. That this meeting takes place in the white man's premises suggests that the villages can use the coming of the white man to transcend the rivalry rending the fabric of society. His capacity to perceive culture and events as polar rather than unitary leads to the destruction of the traditional religion. One cannot help but be fascinated by his desire to exercise volitions that are unpopular among his kin. His enemies are perplexed when he testifies against his clan and sends his son among "infidels". These actions appear to

his enemies as proof of his treacherous alliance with the white man. However, his rejection of Winterbottom's appointment as Paramount Chief baffles his enemies. Achebe here probably plots his most sophisticated character; delineating an African dignitary's searching mind in a confrontation with an enemy that is ostensibly indomitable. Ezeulu suffers from a strong ambivalent impulse that embraces and rejects the colonial enterprise.

Homi Bhabha argues in this light when he intimates the luminal experience that collapses the idea of the colonial encounter as simply an oppositional event of otherness. The colonial encounter was a beginning point whereby two streams merged and took on new directions as witnessed in the ineluctable settlement of the Europeans in Africa. Ezeulu, therefore, finds himself at the threshold of a new dawn. He is placed at an intersection between different villages and different ideologies, therefore, collapsing the idea of a polarized colonial encounter. He is both member and outsider in the polity and this in part suggests his willingness to reach across to the other. Africa, like Europe, was never a homogeneous mass but a conglomerate of conflicting forces (1).

According to Ong, the coming together of different cultures is never a smooth affair without its hurdles. Ezeulu is not embracing the white man wholeheartedly; he intends to take what is useful to him as he says to his son: "I have sent you to be my eyes there" (*AOG* 189). Embracing an alien culture, therefore, goes with the risk of rejection on the part of one's own people and the fear that the new culture will obliterate the old. This is problematic for persons rooted in primary oral cultures who want literacy but who also know very well that moving into the exciting world of literacy means leaving behind much that is exciting and deeply loved in the earlier oral world. And yet he goes on to emphasize the fallibility of an oral culture thus: "An oral culture has no texts. How can it get together organized material for recall?" (33). Davidson upholds this view when he argues that one of the greatest challenges facing oral cultures was accommodating rapid change: "Once a community had achieved stability within its environment, each of these evolving African societies had to stick closely to its rules for survival. ... Yet at the same time, it had to allow for its success: ..." (82). In this regard, Achebe will comment on the Ibo's capacity to acknowledge even the hostile and macabre in their presence (*The Education* 110). Ezeulu acknowledges the power of representation in the other and stretches out to allocate it the space it deserves even when such an acknowledgment imperils what had hitherto stood for spiritual and communal order.

One weakness among the natives is the tendency to accumulate power

on one man. Without separation of powers and the potential to hold leaders to account the society is doomed to failure. Ezeulu has no direct assistance to perform the customary practices of the community in his absence. On the other hand, we see Winterbottom ably assisted in absentia. Had it been that Ulu had a written text the disintegration of his cult might have been avoided. Ezeulu sees writing as an agency – as freedom from the quagmire of illiteracy. As the chief priest of Ulu, writing could facilitate the preservation of power and resist the intruding culture. Part of the conflict lies in discordant narrations of sacred history, to the extent that elders give different testimonies of history; therefore, creating ambiguities and incredulity in important matters of general welfare. The Ezeulu versus Ezidemili dichotomy takes centre place permitted by the preposterousness of orality. Versions of sacred history are falsified to meet the yearnings of power and revenge. My impression is that Ezeulu sees writing and the preservation of history as mandatory to the unity of his people. In sending his son Oduche to learn the ideologies of the conquistador that writing allows, Ezeulu allows more than he can conceive. Why will Oduche's precocious mind respond with such commitment to the proselytizing influences of the other? Is Ulu not allowing its own surrender to a greater deity? One argument is that of an arrogant priest driving a god and a religion and of course a whole people into the abyss. It would be more probable given the overarching nature of the intruding force to see that Ezeulu has no such power. He, as an arrow, and can hardly know in advance what the circumstances will be although he takes advantage of situations that advantage him in his revenge. The argument that the smaller god surrenders to a greater god, like the sun absorbing a star, can be more plausible.

Ezeulu witnesses the encroaching power of Christianity as he sits in the shrine of Ulu just as he had earlier experienced the bliss of having his compound altered into a Christian location. This is suggested thus: "As Ezeulu cast his strings of cowries the bell of Oduche's people began to ring. For one brief moment, he was distracted by its sad, measured monotone and thought how strange it was that it should sound so near – much nearer than it did in his compound" (*AOG* 210).

He is here experiencing the encroaching power of the religion he has half-heartedly embraced. The tolling bell of the church overshadows his cast cowries signalling a surrender of one religion to the other. His son will be the new priest in the new dispensation as he himself descends into madness and oblivion. Mr. Goodcountry, the evangelist, anoints the new prophet thus: "When the time comes for your baptism you will be called Peter; on this

rock will I build my church” (49). Udoche’s future in the new dispensation is therefore grounded in his meteoric rise within the institutions that have writing as the centre of their power base.

Conclusively, Achebe places the appropriation of writing at the centre of *Arrow of God* suggesting that the colonial encounter was one of reciprocal appropriation. The colonialists saw in Africa vast opportunities and Africans, in turn, saw in the colonialists equally important opportunities for progress. It is writing that attracts the Chief Priest to the colonialists as he marvels at the power of literacy. The novel is driven by the complication that derives from his embracement of the colonial technology of writing. This is a point that is often overlooked in criticism of this great novel. Achebe plots a character who succeeds in maintaining his people’s spirituality by destroying their indigenous religious beliefs based on discrepant oral accounts on the one hand and allowing his son (Oduche) to initiate his people into a spiritual experience based on literacy on the other hand. If god is stable then his word must be sacrosanct. The chief priest of Ulu violates the precepts of his position and suffers immolation but at the same time succeeds in allowing his son who has appropriated the art of writing to guide the people into a new order. In the end, the native society is freed from the imbroglio of its adversarial gods by embracing a canonical deity. The famine that ensues from the feud pushes the people to Christianity: “So the news spread that anyone who did not want to wait and see all his harvest ruined could take his offering to the god of the Christians who claimed to have power of protection from the anger of Ulu” (216). This protection is real because Christianity has ultimately absorbed Ulu in its pantheon seen in the pivotal place of Oduche in the church: “Thereafter any yam harvested in the fields was harvested in the name of the son” (*AOG* 230). And so the novel closes with this last line, underscoring my thesis that a canonical pantheon absorbs the African pantheon and allowing the society a better direction.

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