

The Python Episodes in Achebe's Novels

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The poem "Lament of the Sacred Python" in Achebe's *Beware, Soul Brother* reminds one of Ezeulu's dream in *Arrow of God*. In that novel we are told that Ezeulu is having "one of those strange dreams which were more than ordinary dreams."¹ In it he hears the voices of a funeral procession passing behind his compound: "He told himself that he must go out and challenge them because it was said that unless a man wrestled with those who walked behind his compound the path never closed" (*AOG*, p. 221). But lacking resolution he remains where he is and listens to the mourners sing the funeral dirge:

Look! a python
Look! a python
Yes, it lies across the way.

He calls the members of his family "to join him in challenging the trespassers but his compound was deserted. His irresolution turned into alarm" (*AOG*, pp. 221-22). Running from hut to hut looking for someone to help him, Ezeulu suddenly hears a new voice take the place of those of the chanting mourners:

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 ha ha . . . (*AOG*, p. 222)

The laughter, which sounds demented to Ezeulu, awakens him, and as he returns to consciousness he recognizes the voice as that of his own mad mother.

We understand now that the dream funeral party which is trespassing in Ezeulu's compound is laying the sacred python itself to rest. This is an obviously symbolic act; but it is not enough to say that the python stands for the old religion, especially in *Arrow of God* where Ezeulu and the priest of Idemili are rivals. The python appears to have a more specific thematic reference.

The python is considered sacred in many parts of West Africa. It is a nonpoisonous snake which is gentle and harmless, though it can become fairly large. Geoffrey Parrinder, in *West African Religions*, lists many tabus found

throughout West Africa concerning pythons. The Fon, for example, will give funeral honors to dead pythons. "The Ashanti must not kill or eat a python, and if he finds a dead python in the forest he will bury it with funeral honors, like a human being."² The Ibo, Ibibio, and Ijaw also regard it a sin to kill or eat pythons, and they too will bury them. Parrinder notes that: "Any house that a python enters is thought to be blessed, though the prudent householder will steer it away from doing any serious damage."³

When Achebe uses the python in "Lament of the Sacred Python," in *Things Fall Apart* and in *Arrow of God*, he is using a symbol which has significance in terms of the West African religious/mythic environment, as well as one which belongs to the archetypes of world myth (snakes as phallic symbols and symbols of immortality). What seems significant about Achebe's use of the python is that it always appears in the same type of episode. It is always portrayed in a situation in which a Christian commits sacrilege against it. Furthermore, the Christian, significantly, is never European, but rather always African. The python episodes suggest, therefore, not just a turning away from old traditions, but a flaunting and despising of them.

In *Things Fall Apart* there are two python episodes, both used as illustrations of the effects of Christianity on Umuofia. The Christians allow the *osu* into their ranks, and one of these converted *osu* in Mbanta is reputed to have killed a python: "The royal python was the most revered animal in Mbanta and all the surrounding clans. It was addressed as 'Our Father,' and was allowed to go wherever it chose, even into people's beds. It ate rats in the house and sometimes swallowed hen's eggs. If a clansman killed a python accidentally, he made sacrifices of atonement and performed an expensive burial ceremony such as was done for a great man. No punishment was prescribed for a man who killed the python knowingly. Nobody thought that such a thing could ever happen."⁴ Because no one had seen the man kill the python, the clansmen prefer to think it might just be braggadocio on his part. At any rate, as one of them says: "It is not our custom to fight for our gods. . . . Let us not presume to do so now. If a man kills the sacred python in the secrecy of his hut, the matter lies between him and the god" (*TFA*, p. 45). Instead of the more violent action Okonkwo would like to see taken against the Christians, they are merely ostracized, and debarred from using either the stream or the quarry. When the missionary, Mr. Kiaga, asks his people why they are not allowed to use the stream, he is told: "They say that Okoli killed the sacred python. . . . 'It is false,' said another. 'Okoli told me himself that it was false.' Okoli was not there to answer. He had fallen ill on the previous night. Before the day was over he was dead. His death showed that the gods were still able to fight their own battles. The clan saw no reason then for molesting the Christians" (*TFA*, p. 147).

The second python episode takes place in Okonkwo's own village. There the Christian son of the priest of the snake cult has supposedly killed and eaten a python. Later, in another burst of zeal, the man, Enoch, commits the unforgivable crime of unmasking an *egwugwu* in public. This leads to the powerful scene at the end of the novel in which the clansmen revenge this insult by burning first Enoch's compound and then the church itself, resulting in their arrest, sham trial, and humiliation.

These two scenes emphasize the disintegrating effect that the Christian religion is having on the clan, which is certainly one of the most clearly underlined themes in the novel.

The central figure of *Arrow of God* is Ezeulu, priest of the created god Ulu. When the six villages of Umuaro were still disunited they were subject to attack from the "hired soldiers of Abam."

Things were so bad for the six villages that their leaders came together to save themselves. They hired a strong team of medicine-men to install a common deity for them. This deity which the fathers of the six villages made was called Ulu. Half of the medicine was buried at a place which became the Nkwo market and the other half thrown into the stream which became Mili Ulu. The six villages then took the name of Umuaro, and the priest of Ulu became their Chief Priest. From that day they were never again beaten by an enemy. (AOG, p. 15)

The deity was installed in the smallest of the villages, Umuachala. Before this the largest and most powerful of the villages had also been the religious center of the villages: Umunneora, where the chief god was Idemili, patron of the python. Now it is Ulu who is said to stand "above Eru and all the other deities" (AOG, p. 9).

In an incident which took place five years before the novel begins, Ezeulu had stood up against the clan in a land dispute which Umuaro had with the neighboring clan of Okperi. Umuaro went to war with Okperi despite Ezeulu's claim that Ulu would not side with them. This war was brought to an end by the intervention of the white man. In the trial which the white man had to decide to whom the land belonged, Ezeulu testified against his own people. The men of Umunneora, especially Nwaka, felt that Ezeulu had betrayed the clan by his part in the trial, and an enmity between Umunneora and Ezeulu's village, Umuachala, arose. Earlier, when Ezeulu had refused to support the war, Nwaka had reminded him that the people of Aninta had burned one of their gods which had failed them. The people of Umuaro expected Nwaka to be struck down by Ulu for making such a rash statement, but he not only survived, he boasted of his deed at the Idemili festival:

In the five years since these things happened people sometimes asked themselves how a man could defy Ulu and live to boast. It was better to say that it was not Ulu the man taunted; he had not called the god's name. But if it was, where did Nwaka get his power? For when we see a little bird dancing in the middle of the pathway we must know that its drummer is in the near-by bush.

Nwaka's drummer and praise-singer was none other than the priest of Idemili, the personal deity of Umunneora. This man, Ezidemili, was Nwaka's great friend and mentor. It was he who fortified Nwaka and sent him forward. (AOG, p. 40)

As a result of his testimony in the land dispute trial, the white man calls Ezeulu the only truthful man in the two clans. Ezeulu now believes that the white man, Winterbottom, is his friend and so agrees to send one of his sons, Oduche, among the Christians. Ostensibly Oduche will learn their ways and report back to his father. But the boy soon realizes the power he will have if he learns the white man's language, and he becomes a good student for his own ends.

The teacher, Mr. Goodcountry, is an African from the Niger Delta, and he urges the converts of Umuaro to prove the sincerity of their faith by killing pythons, symbols of heathenism as well as being "the snake that deceived our first mother, Eve" (AOG, p. 47). The more conservative members of the congregation balk at this idea, but Oduche decides he will prove himself and kill a python. In fact he only has the courage to lock the snake in his trunk. "The python would die for lack of air, and he would be responsible for its death without being guilty of killing it" (AOG, p. 50). But the struggles of the python in the trunk draw the attention of his family; his father opens the trunk and the sacrilege is discovered. The story quickly circulates, and by evening a messenger comes from Umunneora who tells Ezeulu that "Ezidemili wants to know how you intend to purify your house of the abomination that your son has committed" (AOG, p. 54). Ezeulu's reply is a terse one: "Go back and tell Ezidemili to eat shit." He is aware of the fact that the outrage Oduche committed was a serious matter: "But the ill will of neighbours and especially the impudent message sent him by the priest of Idemili left him no alternative but to hurl defiance at them all" (AOG, p. 59). He rationalizes the situation thus: "Every Umuaro child knows that if a man kills the python inadvertently he must placate Idemili by arranging a funeral for the snake almost as elaborate as a man's funeral. But there was nothing in the custom of Umuaro for the man who puts the snake into a box. Ezeulu was not saying that it was not an offence, but it was not serious enough for the priest of Idemili to send him an insulting message. It was the kind of offence which a man put right between himself and his personal god" (AOG, p. 60).

So, the authority and power of both Ulu and Idemili, and consequently the faith of the people in them, have been undermined. Ulu's strength is called into question by the way Nwaka seems to have been able to flaunt him, and Idemili's python becomes the butt of the jokes of children. Ezeulu hears his youngest children chanting: "Eke nekwo onye uka! Nekwo onye uka! Nekwo onye uka!" or "Python, run! There is a Christian coming." Ezeulu asks them what it means, and they reply: "'Akwuba told us that a python runs away as soon as it hears that.' Ezeulu broke into a long, loud laughter. Nwako'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, p. 205).

The situation is similar to that at the end of *Things Fall Apart*. The cultural tabus and religious beliefs which have held the people together are being undermined because for the first time these tabus are being tested and found wanting. So when Ezeulu refuses to call the New Yam festival, the Christians can capitalize on this and tell the clansmen that if they offer their yams to the Christian God he will protect them from the wrath of Ulu. This is the end of the cult of Ulu, and the significance of this is not lost on the reader. Ulu had been created as the symbol of the unity of the six villages, and as his cult falls so does the social structures that maintained him. The theme illustrated is that of internal disintegration, and this is the theme the python episodes always illustrate.

Most critics seem to agree that Ezeulu's refusal to set the date of the yam festival is headstrongness on his part. They see it as his personal revenge on the people who made him go to Okperi. The scene in which he hears Ulu tell him that this was not Ezeulu's fight would then seem to be the beginning of the Chief Priest's madness. Ezeulu hears Ulu's voice inside his skull telling him that this was Ulu's way of settling his quarrel with Idemili "who wants to destroy me so that his python may come to power" (AOG, p. 192).

After that there was no more to be said. Who was Ezeulu to tell his deity how to fight the jealous cult of the sacred python? It was a fight of the gods. He was no more than an arrow in the bow of his god. This thought intoxicated Ezeulu like palm wine. New thoughts tumbled over themselves and past events took on new, exciting significance. 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?

And what about the white man's religion and even the white man himself? This was close on profanity but Ezeulu was now in a mood to follow things through. Yes, what about the white man himself? After all he had once taken sides with Ezeulu and, in a way, had taken sides with him again lately by exiling him, thus giving him a weapon with which to fight his enemies.

If Ulu had spotted the white man as an ally from the very beginning it would explain many things. It would explain Ezeulu's decision to send Oduche to learn the ways of the white man. It was true Ezeulu had given other explanations for his decision but those were the thoughts that had come into his head at the time. One half of him was man and the other half *mmo*—the half that was painted over with white chalk at important religious moments. And half of the things he ever did were done by this spirit side. (*AOG*, p. 192)

Ezeulu may be going mad at this point, but I do not think we can question his sincerity. This point is emphasized later when the narrator describes Ezeulu's sorrow over the pain he is being forced to cause to the clan. The passage goes on to note: "Perhaps Akuebue was the only man in Umuaro who knew that Ezeulu was not deliberately punishing the six villages as some people thought. He knew that the Chief Priest was helpless; that a thing greater than *nte* had been caught in *nte's* trap" (*AOG*, p. 219). It seems clear that Ezeulu is sincere in his belief that what is happening is the work of the gods, not his personal vengeance.

When Ezeulu's son, Obika, dies "Some people expected Ezidemili to be jubilant. Such people did not know him. He was not that kind of man and besides he knew too well the danger of such exultation. All he was heard to say openly was: 'This should teach him how far he could dare next time'" (*AOG*, p. 228). But Ezeulu has been crushed.

"Why, he asked himself again and again, why had Ulu chosen to deal thus with him, to strike him down and cover him with mud? What was his offence? Had he not divined the god's will and obeyed it? . . . What could it point to but the collapse and ruin of all things?" (*AOG*, p. 229).

The people of Umuaro believe that Ulu is siding with them against "his headstrong and ambitious priest."

If this was so then Ulu had chosen a dangerous time to uphold this wisdom. In destroying his priest he had also brought disaster on himself, like the lizard in the fable who ruined his mother's funeral by his own hand. For a deity who chose a time such as this to destroy his priest or abandon him to his enemies was inciting people to take liberties; and Umuaro was just ripe to do so. The Christian harvest

which took place a few days after Obika's death saw more people than even Goodcountry could have dreamed. In his extremity many an Umuaro man had sent his son with a yam or two to offer to the new religion and to bring back the promised immunity. Thereafter any yam that was harvested in the man's fields was harvested in the name of the son. (AOG, p. 230)

So what had started off as a rivalry between two villages, a rivalry enflamed by Ezeulu's refusal to punish Oduche for imprisoning the python, culminates as the catalyst which brings about Umuaro's internal disintegration. And, as Wilfred Cartey points out in *Whispers from a Continent*, throughout his work, Achebe seems to emphasize those conflicts and rivalries *within* the clan which "facilitated British colonial penetration." The list of rivalries and hostilities shown in this novel are impressive; they permeate every level of the society. First there are the hostilities between two clans in the same tribe, portrayed in the land dispute between Umuaro and Okperi. Within one clan, Umuaro, there are the rivalries between the villages of Ummuneoro and Umuachula. Within a single village, there are the rivalries between Christians and non-Christians. Further hostilities are found even in the more basic unit of the family. Within Ezeulu's family we see the rivalry between Ezeulu's two wives, Matefi and Ugoye, the jealousies among his sons, and the estrangement between Ezeulu himself and his brother Onenyi.

Achebe, as is well known, uses proverbs to reflect the major themes in his novels, and clearly one of the most important proverbs in this novel is "Have you not heard that when two brothers fight a stranger reaps their harvest?" The speaker is Ezeulu, who goes on to refer to the destruction of Abame: "How many white men went in the party that destroyed Abame? Do you know? Five. . . . Now have you ever heard that five people—even if their heads reached the sky—could overrun a whole clan? Impossible. With all their power and magic white men would not have overrun entire Olu and Igbo if we did not help them. Who showed them the way to Abame? They were not born there; how then did they find the way? We showed them and are still showing them" (AOG, Pp. 131-32).

It is clear then that one of the central themes of *Arrow of God* is that the outside influences of Christianity and the British colonial system were definitely aided in their activity by this internal conflict. More emphatically, one could state that the emphasis is almost wholly on the internal forces. Once again in the python episodes it is the African converts who kill or imprison pythons and that they are urged to do so not by the British missionaries, but by fellow Africans like Mr. Goodcountry, who tells the converts of Umuaro about the early Christians of the Niger Delta, where he came from, "who fought the bad customs of their people, destroyed shrines and killed the sacred iguana. He told them of Joshua Hart, his kinsman, who suffered martyrdom in Bonny. 'If we are Christians, we must be ready to die for the faith,' he said. 'You must be ready to kill the python as the people of the rivers killed the iguana. You address the python as Father. It is nothing but a snake, the snake that deceived our first mother Eve. If you are afraid to kill it do not count yourself a Christian" (AOG, pp. 46-47). As elsewhere in the world, it is the convert who is most zealous in promoting the new faith and working to the detriment of the system he has deserted. On the other hand, it is pointed out in the last pages that Winterbottom is totally unaware of what is happening in Umuaro. Thus external forces remain ignorant of how the situation changes.

We can isolate the effect of internal forces on the disintegration of the society as being a central theme in both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*; and the symbol of the python underlines the violence of those internal forces. The convert comes to despise his past, represented by the python. And the gentle python of Ibo tradition becomes metamorphosed, in the eyes of the converted African, into the serpent of the garden of Eden.

NOTES

¹Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, rev. ed. (London: Heinemann, 1974), p. 221. All subsequent references to *Arrow of God* (AOG) will be given in the text.

²Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religions* (London: Epworth Press, 1961), p. 51.

³Parrinder, *West African Religions*, p. 52.

⁴Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1967), p. 144. All subsequent references to *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) will be given in the text.