

## The Theatrics of Achebe's *Arrow of God* as Matrix for Dramatic Adaptation

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### ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine the theatrics of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* with a view to verifying their potential for the novel's dramatic or stage adaptation. The paper is motivated by the assumption that the theatrics can be artistically synthesized to create a play script or performance that can be more aesthetically and ideologically appreciated than the novel. In view of this motivation and to inspire many effective adaptations of the novel, the following questions need to be addressed by the paper: What are theatrics? What impressions, performances, behaviours and effects exemplify the theatrics of the novel? How do these exemplary theatrics constitute a matrix for dramatic or stage adaptations of *Arrow of God*? While addressing these questions, the paper hopes to achieve its major objective of verifying the theatrics of the novel and suggesting how they can work together as a matrix for adaptations.

**Keywords:** theatrics, performance, matrix, adaptation, behaviours, effects

### Introduction

The term 'theatrics' implies the techniques or tricks employed in theatrical or dramatic activities, which can trigger some effects on percipients. In the words of *The New Webster's Dictionary of English Language*, theatrics refer to "theatrical performances, theatrical behaviour or effects" (1995: 1024). Examples can be chosen from a broad spectrum of theatrical performances and behaviours, with their effects, but first, what is performance? Richard Schechner (1988: xiii), in his "performance theory", configures 'performance' as an inclusive term that ropes in the ideas of theatre, rituals, and everyday life activities, among others. Schechner (2006: 2) maintains that "performance must be construed as a broad spectrum" or a continuum of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and regular live performances, to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race and class roles, and on to healing (from Shamanism to surgery), the media and internet". Deriving from Schechner's theory of

performance, theatrics can include human actions, performing arts, daily life activities (as distinguished from the performing arts), race and class relationships, rituals and other preternatural activities, which manifest theatrical effects such as humour, sorrow, pity, fear and excitement; and involve the presence of actors (performers), imaginative, physical and intellectual tasks. Such activities make use of space and provide entertainment for the audience.

These theatrics constitute the matrix for effective literary, dramatic and stage adaptation of the novel. Matrix, here, connotes a set of ideas that forms the basis of dramatic synthesis and becomes the source of materials for building the form and structure of the adaptation. These materials include plot incidents with their elements that make for dramatic effect, such as “conflict, dilemma, irony, suspense and surprise” (Albright et al., 1968: 22-27). Other materials are dramatic characters and language and visual elements of the performance.

Dramatic adaptation here refers to the act of recasting the novel – *Arrow of God* – to a dramatic text or a stage production. In this sense, the incidents of the novel can be reduced and re-arranged, focusing on the significant theatrical events and bearing the conventions of playwriting and staging possibilities in mind. Generally, the concept of adaptation has been enunciated by the *Dictionary of Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis* as:

The recasting of a work in one genre to another (adaptation of a novel for the stage, for instance) is a dramaturgical work based on the text to be staged. All imaginative textual manoeuvres are permissible: cuts, rearrangement of narration, stylistic polishing, the use of fewer characters or locations, a dramatic focus on certain strong points of the novel, the addition of external texts, montage and collage of foreign elements, different endings and changes in the Fabula (plot) as required by the staging. Adaptation, unlike translation or contemporisation, can be very free; it does not hesitate to change or even invert the meaning of the original play. To adapt is to entirely rewrite the text, using it as raw material .... (Pavis, 1998: 14).

Given the preceding clarifications, the novel, *Arrow of God*, can thus be studied and analysed with a view to identifying its theatrics that may be exploited as the matrix for dramatic adaptation.

### **Synopsis of the Novel**

The novel portrays a traditional community called Umuaro, which comprises six clans living together under the protective umbrella of a deity – Ulu. Ezeulu, who is the chief priest of the deity, derives regal esteem from his people’s reverence for the god. Equipped by this royal status, Ezeulu is able to play a pivotal role in the community, combining his duties as guardian of Umuaro cosmos, a paterfamilias, and a middle man between Ulu and the people. He shoulders these responsibilities with various challenges coming from internal and external forces.

At the opening of the story, Ezeulu is looking forward to a new moon. Having spotted it, he announces its appearance. He observes the necessary rituals accompanying the new moon and plans to announce the day of the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves. It is the chief priest’s task also to announce the date for the New Yam Feast when the time comes.

These seasonal events are harmoniously laid down and followed year after year. At the same time, Ezeulu as “watchman” ensures that none of them is overlooked or overshot beyond its allotted time and space. As a paterfamilias, Ezeulu has a polygamous family. Although interpersonal conflicts arise in his household, especially among his wives, children and in-law, his authority and sagacity help him suppress and ward off major crises. His children, such as Edogo, Obika, and Akueke, among others, and his wives- Ugoye and Matefi- hold him in high esteem and accept his authority as law.

As a middle man between his people and Ulu, and working as one who supervises the order of events in Umuaro, he has rigid moral principles. In such a revered position, he cannot afford to be fraudulent or deceptive to his people; hence, he tells the truth, even against his own clan, during the land dispute between Okperi and Umuaro. For this reason, while describing Ezeulu, Captain Winterbottom – a colonial officer living at Government Hill in Okperi – says to Tony Clarke (his fellow colonial officer): “I think I told you the story of the fetish priest who impressed me most favourably by speaking the truth in the land case between these people here and Umuaro” (p.107). Earlier, Winterbottom had also suggested a reason why Ezeulu was truthful in the land dispute: “Only one man, a kind of priest-king in Umuaro, witnessed against his own people. I have not found out what it was, but I think he must have had some pretty fierce tabuu working on him (p.38).

This expression is likely to be alluding to the view that the reverence for Ulu prevents the priest from telling lies like his other clansmen in the land. However, the cosmic order in Umuaro begins to destabilize when Winterbottom sends for Ezeulu to meet him at Okperi. The conflicts and counter conflicts that erupt from this invitation, coupled with Ezeulu’s rigidity of mind, soil the relationship between him and the Umuaro people. This situation has the ugly consequence of delaying the year’s harvest, which creates a crack through which the Christian God is seen as an easy alternative to Ulu, and a protective force against any punitive measure that may come from the god. As a result, both Ulu and its priest, Ezeulu, lose out when the natives, rather than taking their yam to Ulu during the New Yam Feast, abandon the god and its priest and take the gifts to the Christian church.

### **Theatrics of the Novel**

The theatrics here are grouped into three, namely: Theatrics of tradition, the theatrics of community pantheon and the theatrics of colonialism. The tradition of the Umuaro people embodies theatrical performances like festivals, communication culture, and family relationships, including marriage and division of labour. Festivals like the Pumpkin leaves, the “Akwu Nro”, “Mgba Agbogho”, or the Wrestling of the Maidens, and the New Yam, among others, provide dramatic episodes like a celebration, ritual, mythic conflict, speech and speech surrogates, characterization, costume and makeup. Like the “Akwu Nro” festival, some of the festivals feature masquerade displays. The use of space, ranging from the communal arena, market square or family compounds, also features in the feasts.

The pumpkin leaves festival, in performance, corroborates the above ascriptions. It involves the announcement of its date, the gathering of crowds, the anticipation of Ezeulu, his appearance and display, and his departure. The announcement is made by Ezeulu’s assistants. On the appointed date, a crowd of spectators gathers in anticipation of the protagonist – the

chief priest of Ulu. Friends sit in groups to drink palm wine. Sounds of “Ikolo” and “Ogene” herald his appearance, which marks the climax of the performance. After he has performed the ritual dance and begins to run around the performance area, women throw pumpkin leaves at him, praying for purification. After this, crowds break into groups again to finish the celebration.

In the performance, women dress elegantly, and wives of wealthy men like Nwaka, are costumed with costly ivory and velvet materials as proof of wealth. Ezeulu is made up to look white on one half of his body. The festival is indeed a ‘total theatre’, which is a performance that seeks to draw upon and exploit the totality of performative devices – music, dance, acting...” (Kennedy 2011, 605); a theatre that employs “a colourful and celebratory performance style where all staging and musical elements blended ...” (Mackey and Cooper 2000, 202). Another festival – the “Akwu Nro” – is more dramatic when it involves masquerading. The age group that features the masquerade takes some time to search for the mask on the performance day. Having found it, the action occurs in the village arena, where surrounded by a crowd of spectators, the masquerade moves vigorously and intermittently addresses the elders. For example,

“Ezeulu de-de-de-de-de’ – says the mask.  
‘Our father, my hand is on the ground’, – Ezeulu replies  
‘Ezeulu, do you know me?’ – the mask repeats (pg. 199)  
This dialogue ends with a song by the performing age group:  
Ezeulu, our mask salutes you  
Eje-ya – mma-mma-mma-mma-mma-mma .... (pg.201)

Other spectacles occur, which lack space cannot permit elaboration here.

Communication culture yields dramatic effects like humour, witticism, proverbs, rhetoric, tale-telling and enactment. These elements regularly feature in conversations, long speeches and other verbal expressions among Umuaro people, especially Ezeulu, Nwaka, Akuebue, and other elevated elders of the community. Apart from offering theatrical pleasure, these speech devices are acclaimed as attributes of high-quality theatre. According to Mackey and Cooper (2000: 87), “in a great period of Restoration comedy, wit was considered to be most important in high-quality theatre. Even now, most audiences enjoy the use of clever language (wit) and wordplay.”

Other examples of daily life expressions in the novel which the novelist arranges for theatrical effects are, first, at the appearance of the new moon, Obiageli and Nwafor engage in a terse dramatic dialogue:

‘Does the moon kill people?’ asked Obiageli  
‘I said does the moon kill people?’  
‘It kills little girls’, said Nwafor, her brother  
‘I did not ask you, ant-hill nose’  
‘You will soon cry, long throat’  
The moon kills little boys.  
The moon kills ant-hill nose .... (p.2)

Second, in the conversation between Akuebue and Ezeulu when the former visits the latter, there are wits and jests: as Akuebue draws near Ezeulu's hut, he asks:

'Is the owner of this house still alive?'  
'Who is this man?' asked Ezeulu.  
'Did they not say that you died two markets come next Afo?'  
'... How are your people?' asked Ezeulu  
'They are quiet' (p.93-94).

Third, the conversation between two policemen who are sent to arrest Ezeulu and a man carrying a pot of palm wine which they stopped to ask questions, is full of humour.

'Where is Ezeulu's house?' asked the leader....  
'Ezeulu', he said after a long time .... 'which Ezeulu?'  
'How many Ezeulu's do you know?' asked the corporal...  
'How many Ezeulu's do I know?' repeated the man after him  
'I don't know any Ezeulu's' (p.151).

The language of speech surrogates like the drums ('ikolo), 'ogene' (gong) and the flute is theatrical insofar as they entertain and provide rhythms that are danced and sung.

Family affairs such as marriage provide theatrics like dance, ritual and songs, as exemplified during the arrival of Obika's bride - Okuata. On this occasion, the girls who attended her "sang a song called 'Ifeoma' meaning 'Goodly thing had come'" (p.116). Again, the ritual "Sacrifice of crossroads" (p.117) is theatric of marriage. The old chant raised by women "whenever a particularly impressive item of food is set before them" (p. 116) is theatrical. Example:

Kwo-kwo-kwo-kwo-kwo!  
Kwo-o-oh!  
We are going to eat again as we are wont to do!  
Who provides?  
Who is it...  
Obika Ezeulu he provides  
Ayo-o-o-0-oh!

Regarding family relationships, theatrical episodes like the earlier mentioned interaction between Ezeulu's family and that of Akuebue, familial frictions within Ezeulu's household, and other interpersonal differences found between Ezeulu and other families present materials for dramatic composition.

The Umuaro pantheon also displays episodes such as the conflicts between Ezidemili and Ezeulu on the one hand and Nwaka's antagonism against the latter on the other hand. Nwaka often hides under the shield of "Idemili" to assault Ezeulu and cause Ezidemili to do the same. And this happens especially when Oduche, son of Ezeulu, locks up the sacred python in a box. Ezidemili musters the guts to send an insulting message to Ezeulu through a messenger:

Ezidemili sends me,' says the messenger.... 'Ezidemili wants to know what you will do about the abomination committed in your house.... (53-54).

Above all, the Ulu deity is the womb that hatches the major dramatic conflict of the novel. The deity is the hub of Ezeulu's tragic flaw, leading him to destroy himself and sell out the people's loyalty to Whiteman's religion.

Theatrics of colonialism manifest in the conflicts generated by the activities of colonial masters in Okperi and the new Christian religion in Umuaro. These theatrics features at various levels, namely: the narrations of Winterbottom's contributions to Okperi - Umuaro land dispute; the Whiteman's rash treatment of Obika during the road works; and most dramatically, the tense moments that are played out through Winterbottom's invitation of Ezeulu to Okperi, his imprisonment, his release, his return, and the series of meetings between him and the elders.

As aspects of colonialism, the crisis between Mr Goodcountry and Moses Unachukwu in the new church and the ideological conflict between the Christian teachings and the indigenous lores are also considered as theatrical episodes for dramatic synthesis. Ezeulu's adversities through these colonial experiences also constitute theatrical materials for literary composition and stage presentation.

Generally, these theatrics can selectively and diversely be strung together in different dramatic structures, each of which becomes a matrix for composing a full-length drama text or stage production. In other words, diverse plots can be raised from these theatrics, dramatizing one central conflict or another, picking dramatis personae from the novel and adapting the language of the text. The question now is how would a dramatic text or a stage production be adapted from the novel – *Arrow of God* – combining particular theatrics as a matrix?

### **Suggestions for the Adaptation**

The suggestions made here are guided by the ideas portrayed earlier in this work concerning the concept of adaptation. In respect of a play script, the adapting playwright begins with a clear vision of what he wants to achieve in the adaptation and how he wants to approach it. He may choose to adopt a conventional approach, a folkist technique, or if he wants to emphasize the political theme of the novel, he may adopt the Brechtian epic approach. The conventional approach here refers to the method of dramaturgy that follows literary conventions - "techniques that occur repeatedly in works of literature" (Abrams and Harpam 2009: 58) rather than the experimental methods like the folkist or Brechtian styles.

In respect of the conventional approach, the plot is linear, broken into scenes and unfolds through dialogue, character delineation, music and other visual elements of spectacle. Examples of conventional plays are Emeka Nwabueze's *When the Arrow Rebounds* (a dramatic adaptation of Achebe's *Arrow of God*). The folkist approach entails what Sam Ukala (2001: 38) calls "the use in African written drama, of folk linguistic, structural and performance styles." It is based on folkism. According to Ukala (2001: 285), folkism refers to "the tendency to base literary plays in the history, culture, and concerns of the folk (people in general) and to compose and perform them in accordance with African conventions; for composing and performing the folktale."

Examples of folkist plays are Sam Ukala's *Akpakaland* (2004), *Placenta of Death* (2007), and *Iredi War* (2014).

The Brechtian Epic Theatre, which differs from the dramatic theatre of Aristotlean drama, is a "narrative" theatre that "turns the spectator into an observer" (Pickering and Woolger 2010: 69).

The actor demonstrates rather than impersonates his role, he comments upon the character being portrayed, and this technique is known as the "alienation effect" (Pickering 2010: 157). In Epic Theatre, action is made discontinuous through a "montage of scenes linked by their illustrative relationship to a central political theme (Brown 2001, 404). Examples of plays written in Brecht's epic style are Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*, Brecht's *The Good Person of Setzuan*, and others.

The next step after his choice of dramaturgical approach is the playwright's decision on the theme he wants to portray among the diverse ideas that are dominant in the novel, such as culture conflict, transculturalism, political imperialism, and others. After this choice, the playwright turns to the theatrics already enunciated in this paper for building his plot. Since the theatrical events in the novel have been arranged in a particular narrative order by the novelist, the adapting playwright decides whether to maintain this sequence or re-arrange it to suit his vision. He may invent dramatic situations or scenes deriving from the theatrics of the novel to enhance his composition. For instance, he may choose to kick off the action in the first scene with activities that he synthesizes from the theatrics of the festival, such as the masquerade display in the "Akwu Nro" festival; or as exemplified in "movement one" of Emeka Nwabueze's *When the Arrow Rebounds*. Here, the playwright begins with an invented action derived from the celebration of the pumpkin leaves festival in the marketplace. Further, the playwright is at liberty to kick off the play in the first scene, using the theatrics associated with the appearance of the new moon.

Alternatively, the plot may kick off with an exposition showing where Ezeulu is seated with Akuebue. Both men are discussing the conflict between Ulu and the new Christian religion. This conflict can be dramatized here. The action begins to rise through the re-enactment of Ulu's coming at the Festival of Pumpkin leaves. The action moves towards a climax through the disagreements in the new church at Umuaro and the later invitation of Ezeulu to Okperi. The climax is achieved when Ezeulu's stubbornness begins to threaten the loyalty of the people to the god. Then, the resolution is reached when Ezulu's flaw leads him to destroy his fortune and give victory to the colonial church.

With the plot and theme ascertained, the adapting playwright decides what he wants to do with the title of the play, its characterization, language, music and spectacle. Nevertheless, the playwright needs to ensure that these elements are not completely different from those of the original text. In other words, the elements should closely reflect the contents of the novel.

As regards the stage realization of the novel, the above suggestions for the textual adaptation can largely apply. Nevertheless, many directorial adjustments will make a difference. The stage director should select relevant theatrics from the ones presented above or others that he may identify in the novel. From his selections, he builds a production scenario based on his directorial concept. Improvisation comes to play in stage movement, dialogue, gestures, and characterization, while design elements of setting, costume, makeup and lighting should be broadly consistent with the aesthetics of the novel. Lights should be designed skillfully to

reflect the signs of daylight, dusk and dawn, or night as the theatrics of the novel dictate. At any rate, the above script adaptation can be produced on the stage, using a good stage director.

In many respects, these conventional script and stage adaptation methods differ from the folkist approach, even though there are unavoidable literary and staging qualities that they share in common. Such qualities are conflict, dialogue, characterization, plot, and others. The folkist script adaptation flows from the beginning to the end like an African folktale performance without being split into scenes. This flow of action is demonstrated in Ukala's *Akpakaland* and *The Placenta of Death*. Sometimes the play may be broken into three bits – the beginning, the middle, and the ending – as in Ukala's *Iredi War*, and these parts are created to indicate the rising of action from exposition, through the climax, to the resolution. Usually, the opening of the play, as in an African folktale performance, is expected to arouse the audience and introduce the subject matter and characters of the story. It also offers the audience an opportunity to encourage or stop a prospective performer .... (Enita 2014: 48).

This folkist method and its features are displayed in a scripted adaptation of the novel, while the script can be produced on the stage. Using Sam Ukala's (2014) formula and terms, as he employed them in his folk play *Iredi War*, the opening of the novel's adaptation is exemplified below. First, a Narrator (as in an African folktale performance) starts the space with an arousal call, followed by an opening song:

**NARRATOR 1:** (Rises and, with her right hand, casts imaginary white chalk powder at The AUDIENCE). E ye m onu nzun! (I give you white chalk!).

**AUDIENCE:** I gwo, o re-e! (If you concoct, may it be efficacious!)

The above arousal call and response are made thrice as NARRATOR I approaches the performance area. Once there, she raises a song:

Luni ilu Tell a tale  
Ilu I –gboba Tale of I – gboba  
Do n'udeo Tua at the rope.... (II)

Through this interaction of the NARRATOR and the AUDIENCE in the opening stage, the plot conceived from the novel's theatrics by the adapting playwright begins to unfold and progress, using all the rules of the folkist dramaturgy which Ukala (2001) enunciates in his theory and practice of folkism.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to address the question of what the term 'theatrics' stands for. The performances, behaviours and effects that exemplify the concept of theatrics in the novel, *Arrow of God*, have also been highlighted and grouped into three: the theatrics of tradition, the theatrics of colonialism and the theatrics of Umuaro pantheon. It is noted that there can be some other groups of theatricals (theatrics) in the novel, but due to spatial constraints, all cannot be exhaustively discussed here. The paper has also suggested how theatrics can be employed in building the plot for a dramatic text or a scenario for a stage production. It is also noted that the adapted script can serve as raw material for the stage production. With all these views, the paper has suggested how theatrics can be combined to

form a matrix for dramatic adaptation. Theatricians or dramatists can be encouraged or guided, through this work, to exploit this masterpiece, written by Achebe (1986), and recast it for the stage or drama script. This will increase the entertainment, ideological and educational values of the novel.

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