Chinua Achebe has frequently spoken out against art for art’s sake. He insists that art is in the service of man. He uses traditional Igbo religious, political, philosophical, and artistic motifs in *Arrow of God* combine to illuminate the abstract notion of duality. He uses Igbo society to demonstrate the arts which is contributed to man’s sensitivity about a fullness of life of which individuality with all its limitations cheats him. The Igbo art tradition is based on Igbo thought which contemplates an inscrutable order that humanity constantly attempts to reorder and control. Achebe identifies certain major characters and situations in Igbo life, using these as the people do in their oral art tradition to portray their perception of the harmonizing principles in their lives. Achebe’s interpretation of Igbo thought through art reveals a relationship between political and religious institutions. It is in these relationships that the Igbo artist and art traditions are most important. In recreating and revealing these connections, Achebe assumes the venerable role of Igbo priest and artist.

His demonstration of this link is most fully realized in *Arrow of God* in which he uses Ezeulu, the priest of Ulu, to explore these institutions in an Igbo community. Ezeulu, priestly function, and his involvement, through Ulu, in making and implementing plans for the security of Umuaro are combined with his attitude toward life and understanding of Igbo thought to give insight into Igbo society. In the performance of his duties to Ulu and Umuaro, he shows a desire to preserve both for posterity. Ulu, created by the people in times of stress, is Umuaro’s god of protection and symbolizes the Igbo’s emphasis on the group. Ezeulu’s desire to preserve this concept becomes the core of Achebe’s portrayal of duality in Igbo thought. The depiction of this concept in *Arrow of God* revolves around Ezeulu and his responsibilities as the priest of Ulu, facilitating Achebe’s exploration of Igbo traditions and art.

Achebe participates in group preservation in a way that is normally the responsibility of only priestly elders. The difference is the location of emphasis. In his direct involvement with the traditional society, Ezeulu tries to bring everything together under religion, while, Achebe explains the society, including Ezeulu, through art. Achebe’s exploration of the many facets of Igbo life in *Arrow of God* simultaneously delineates the complementary discourses that inform their significance within Igbo thought. The locus of his presentation, the priest or artist tradition, will be used here to show how Igbo traditional religion, politics, philosophy, and art were combined to give meaning to the abstract notion of duality, a concept central to most of Achebe’s work and most deliberately explored in *Arrow of God*.

The traditional Igbo priest bridges the real and supernatural worlds, striving to maintain harmony between them. He is able to do this because he has a special relationship with the people and is perceived by them as having special powers. The priest and his functions must be sanctioned by the community. The man who becomes a priests has to
demonstrate that he is in harmony with his environment. He must exhibit an understanding of Igbo thought. The priest of Ala, the earth goddess, must manifest Agwu, divination force, in his life.

In “Political Culture and Stability in Igbo Society” M. S. O Olisa discusses the priesthood: in which the Ala priesthood is discussed, signs that a man is “called” to assume Ala priesthood is the manifestation of “Aguwu” in his life, a mild display by him of mental abnormality in which he sees visions and has supernatural communication with all sorts of spiritual forces. After undergoing this experience the Igbo often initiate and confer on him the title of Ezeani(20).

Community sanction of such manifestations involves the people in the relationship that this individual now with the supernatural world.

In Arrow of God Achebe offers interpretations and explanations for the existence of such institutions, merging their complexities in Ezeulu. In his office as the priest of Ulu, is portrayed as half-man, half-spirit. Achebe invests him with special powers, rights and privileges which give him a strong voice among the elders of Umuaro. His thoughts and actions strongly affect the rest of the community.

Even the action of theme members of his household, because they are close to him, become important to the people; this is the case when Oduche is sent to the new church and when he tries to suffocate the sacred python. Both incidents become major issues for discussion and action in the community because of Ezeulu’s status. In Arrow of God Achebe interprets most aspects of Igbo traditional priesthood through Ezeulu. He discusses the rivalry between Ezeulu’s sons over succession to the priesthood, and also Ezeulu’s eldest son’s apprehension about becoming a priest at his father’s death. However, it is Nwafo, Ezeulu’s youngest son, whom Achebe uses to show how one may be called to the priesthood. Nwafo’s closeness to Ezeulu and his interest in the rituals mark him as a possible choice, among Ezeulu’s sons, as successor to his father.

His youngest son Nwafo came into the Obi, saluted Ezeulu by name and took his favourite position on the mud-bed at the far end, close to the shorter threshold. Although he was still only a child it looked as though the deity had already marked him out as his future chief priest. Nwafo is strongly attracted to the service of the god, Ulu. When Ezeulu is detained at Okperi, it is Nwafo who wonders what should be done about announcing the new moon. However as dusk came down Nwafo took his position where his father always sat. He did not wait very long before he saw the young thin moon. It looked very thin and reluctant. Nwafo reached for the ogene and made to beat it but fear stopped his hand. Although he takes “his position where his father always sat,” he is old enough to know that his father’s successor has to be appointed by Ulu and endorsed by the people of Umuaro. During the festival of the First Pumpkin Leaves, Ezeulu re-enacts the first coming of Ulu, showing how the people’s support made it possible for him to lead them through his priestly office.

As Ezeulu continues with the retelling of the legend of the first coming of Ulu, the duties that go with his priesthood become apparent. He is expected not only to stand between the people and the things that threaten them, but also to eliminate the sources of these threats. He derives strength and confidence from the knowledge that the people support him at all
times. Ezeulu’s role as buffer between his people and their god is comparable to that of the priests and medicine men in Omenuko and Elelea Na the O Mere who cleanse the land and the people of abominations. Ezeulu’s office differs from theirs in that he is also involved in decision-making in Umuaro. The nature of Ulu makes it necessary for him to be concerned with Umuaro’s safety and to play an important philosophical role in the socio-political welfare of the people.

Ezeulu demonstrates his awareness of the possible results of the changing times when he tries to secure Umuaro’s future by sending Oduche to the new religion. Conscious of the Igbo’s concern for preservation of the community, he sees the need to be in control of the present as well as anticipate events of the future. In the past, this consciousness in the people’s worldview led to the amalgamation of the villages that make up Umuaro.

Ezeulu therefore makes Oduche his ambassador to the new religion, Christianity: “I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share”(51).

It may be true that historically such decision may not have been made by a man of Ezeulu’s social status, but the point here is that this type of thinking made it possible for the Igbo to tolerate their own people who joined the new group. Since they could neither chase away nor kill the strangers without harming or even losing their own people, the best approach was to fit the phenomenon into a known and existing world view. Achebe points this out several times in a Arrow of God. When Obika is whipped by Mr. Wright, for instance, instead of confronting Mr. Wright or doing anything else that might make him angrier, the young men quickly reactivate an already existing quarrel, and Achebe comments: “It was much easier to deal with an old quarrel than with a new and unprecedented incident”(94).

Nweke Ukpaka advises his age-mates to let Unachukwu, the carpenter who interprets for Mr. Wright, stay during their deliberations because he is their only link with the white man. Unachukwu is allowed to stay for the same reason that Ezeulusends Oduche to the new church-both are a way of controlling, from a distance, an unprecedented threat to their well being. An intricate and sophisticated man, Ezeulu could not have been unaware that he has compromised his position by urging Oduche to join the white man’s religion and school, whose practices undermine the local tradition. In the past Ulu, the supreme god, protected Umuaro against hostile neighbors. But with the presence of the white man, all their local traditions have become violable. Even Ulu seems vulnerable, a fact signalled by the tolling of a church bell that momentarily distracts the chief priest as he prepares an annual rite.

Ezeulu is convinced that it is only by understanding their ways that he can challenge white men. He confides in his close friend, Akuebue, in proverbial language:

Shall I tell why I sent my son? Then listen. A disease that has never been seen before cannot be cured with everyday herbs…. This is what our sages meant when they said that a man who has nowhere to put his hand of support puts it on his own knee. (133)

Thus, with some ambivalence, the chief priest’s response to social and political exigencies constitutes, for him, the ultimate sacrifice. It is imperative that he seeks information about the “strangers” who have come uninvited to his land.
Power relations in the Umuaro region have changed with the intervention of the colonizer. The British colonial administration suppressed a war between Umuaro and their neighbors, Okperi, propped up Okperi as the administrative center of the subregion, and established warrant chiefs in an a cephalous society. The chief priest has assumed that the power of the white man derives largely from literacy, especially the ability to write with the left hand. Ezeulu’s statement to Oduche about the need to acquire Western literacy is putatively a Fanonian discourse of language as power:

I saw a young white man who was able to write his book with the left hand; he could shout in my face; he could do what he liked. Why? Because he could write with his left hand…. 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 you left hand. (189)

It is clear that Ezeulu is highly impressed with the new forces, he is not willing to cede his authority to them. It is inconceivable that this proud chief priest would abandon his own tradition. Ezeulu is unequivocal in instructing his children about propriety and observance of local customs. He tells Oduche:

When a handshake goes beyond the elbow we know it has turned to another thing… your people should know the custom of this land; if they don’t you must tell them. (13)

It seems to me that Ezeulu seeks social equilibrium, coexistence between the indigenous tradition and the new forces. Unfortunately, he does not anticipate that colonizer, positing his own value system as an absolute, wants to dominate the existing socio-political and economic structure.

Already some of the ancillary trappings of the new culture have caused discomfort in Umuaro. Oduche, unlike any other family member, wears a singlet, and owns a slate and chalk and a wooden box—supplies from the Christian mission. While the rest of his family sit together during a storytelling session, Oduche sits apart, completely absorbed, learning the alphabet from his new book, Azu Ndu. But the real threat to Umuaro comes from the colonizer’s utter disregard and, consequently, his attempt to impose a new order on the local society. A major case is the mission’s crusade against indigenous traditions they consider anathematic to Christian faith. Fired with this zeal, the impressionable Oduche tries to harm a royal python, a symbol of ancestor worship. Oduche’s attempt to suffocate this snake in a box, made by a missionary carpenter, is symbolic of the efforts of the Christian forces to subjugate the traditional religion. Ezeulu regards himself as an equal and a friend of the British administration, and therefore may not have reckoned that he is at odds with the new forces, who are bent on dominating and destroying Umuaro. In line with their fixed definition of relations with the colonized, the British consider themselves at opposite ends with Ezeulu. They failed to recognize common grounds with the local people, the British have no hesitation about exploiting the social order of Umuaro in an attempt to legitimize colonial rule. Indeed, the head of the colonial administration in eastern Nigeria, Captain Winter bottom, is convinced that Ezeulu would be the best candidate through whom to maintain their authority over Umuaro. Having come to that conclusion, the British intimidated and coerced Ezeulu to become chief of Umuaro. But the chief priest remained unswayed, vowing he
would “not be anybody’s chief, except Ulu” (174). Dismayed at Ezeulu resolution, the administration called him an insane witch-doctor and promptly imprisoned him.

Though embittered by his personal experience, Ezeulu is nevertheless determined to find out the full extent of the white man’s power, declaring tersely: “a man must dance the dance prevalent in his time” (189). But first he must contend with problems within his own community. Because of his incarceration the chief priest was not able to perform two of the monthly ceremonies of eating sacred yams from the previous year’s harvest. By custom, Ezeulu must perform these rituals before declaring the new yam festival, which marks the beginning of a new harvest. Meanwhile food from the last season is exhausted. In the ensuing confusion, the Christian mission subverts Ezeulu’s authority by urging Umuaros to harvest their crops once they make offering to the Christian God, who will protect them against Ulu. Initially, the response is slow, but, as the threat of starvation looms, even important members of the community openly seek the sanctuary of the church for immunity against Ulu, thereby subverting the authority of the traditional priest.

In the end, Ezeulu is destroyed. His tragedy is caused not so much by his personal pride as by his failure to determine the true objectives of colonizer. The chief priest’s authority has been undermined by the British administration, thus setting in motion a series of events that disrupt the political and social order Umuaoro, the person with foresight, should be destroyed by the new forces. Achebe’s characterization of Ezeulu belies myths about Africa as a primordial world, an emptiness, where the benighted natives live in benign nature, waiting to be redeemed by Europeans. Ezeulu is a very impressive and an immensely powerful man, with a sharp intellect, and he is independent minded. He is the only opposing voice among the council of elders when Umuaoro declares war on Okperi, and he fervently defends his decision to send Oduche to learn about the white man’s culture. But even when he is at variance with some elders of Umuaoro, Ezeulu never loses Umuaoro confidence in the system whereby leaders of the six villages which from Umuaoro meet and debate mutual matters. As Achebe indicates in Arrow of God, the social fabric of Umuaoro can absorb singular acts, dissensions, and personal differences, since the community has faith in the system. These colonizers then considered it their duty to civilize the Igbo, to save them from the pervasive darkness. This sentiment was expressed by captain Winter bottom who, with self-indulgence, noted the transformation in his houseboy, Boniface:

He’s fine specimen, isn’t he? He’s been with me four years. He was a little boy of thirteen—by my own calculation, they’ve no idea of years—when I took him on. He was absolutely raw. (35)

Their cultural blinkers have prevented the British from relating well to the local people. The British administration do not appreciate Ezeulu’s attributes since, for them, he is no more than “the other”. Ironically, however, it is the chief priest who shows openness, accommodation and desire to relate intellectually and with some objectivity to the foreigners.

The attributes of the Igbo, which Achebe attests to, had been validated nearly two centuries by Olaudah Equiano, whose personal odyssey began in his native Essaka, Igboland, in eastern Nigeria, where he was kidnapped and sold into slavery, and later transported to the West Indies, America, and Europe. Equiano, whose name in Igbo means “one who is chosen” or “who has aloud voice,” struggled to acquire literacy and has given a powerful written testimony of his experience not just of slaver, but Olaudah Equiano, he recalls in endearing
terms details about his birth place, his family, and the social order. Equiano illuminates everyday activities, nothing:

We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. Every great events, such as triumphant return form battle, or other cause of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion. (14)

Even after his immersion in Western culture, Equiano speaks proudly of his African roots. He challenges western aspersions about Africans as primitive, not quite human, and therefore deserving to be enslaved.

In Arrow of God, although Ezeulu is physically destroyed, his vision has staying power. Oduche acquires a powerful tool to express himself, to proclaim the richness of his culture, and even to protests against the presence of the colonizer. The achievements of Achebe himself and others have become possible because of the foundation laid by the likes of Oduche. Arrow of God fits into the framework of black experience and must be linked with substantive issues of African and American humanism.

Works Consulted


