



Call It an “Obi”, Not a Hut: Linguistic Resistance in Chinua Achebe’s “Arrow of God”

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An italicized, non-English word in an otherwise all-English novel demands a certain kind of recognition on the part of the reader. It stands out, it overtakes. It kills any and all assumptions favouring the complete domination of English literature from the moment it appears on the page, and it forces a Western reader to acknowledge a global context of literary works. The third novel in Chinua Achebe’s acclaimed African Trilogy, *Arrow of God*, is no exception to this rule, and its consistent use of Igbo words firmly shakes a Western reader with no prior knowledge of the language out of their comfortable English stupor. In his article, “Igbo Words for the Non-Igbo: Achebe’s Artistry in ‘Arrow of God’” Hugh R. Brown analyzes the

novel by categorizing examples of this deviation from an established monolingual literary canon. He cites Peter Young’s “Tradition, Language and the Reintegration of Identity in West African Literature in English,” using Young’s classification system of the ‘non-deliberate’ (Igbo words whose semantic English meanings can be parsed by their surroundings), and the ‘deliberate’ (terms that do not have a direct English equivalent) (Brown, 1981, p. 70). However, Brown revises Young’s work to include what is essentially a third category of Igbo uses that he places as a subset of the ‘non-deliberate.’ Brown claims that “the nondeliberate category must be subdivided into two units: words whose general semantic meaning is at least relatively clear

and words that remain unknown” (70), a sentiment that I’d both agree and disagree with. It is true that there are defined Igbo words that still remain unclear to a Western reader in *Arrow of God*, but I’d argue that they don’t exist as a facet of the ‘non-deliberate,’ rather they land somewhere in the middle of a ‘deliberate’-‘non-deliberate’ spectrum. So while a foundational understanding of Young’s classification method as well as Brown’s revisions are both undoubtedly useful for an essay committed to understanding *Arrow of God*’s use of Igbo, their dedication to this binary notion of deliberateness threatens to unnecessarily complicate the discussion, as well as potentially undermine Achebe’s craft (‘non-deliberate’ implying that a portion of Achebe’s linguistic techniques are in some way a result of unconscious thought rather than the choices of a skilled author). Thus, a revision of my own is required. Going forward, uses of the Igbo language in *Arrow of God* that can have their general meaning parsed by monolingual English speakers will be known as an ‘explained’ use, while an instance of the Igbo language used because there is no conceptual English equivalent will be dubbed ‘elusive,’ both the ‘explained’ and the ‘elusive’ now existing on either side of a spectrum. I intend to use this new classification system to prove that

the novel uses Igbo in a consistent and constant way, and then posit what Igbo in the novel accomplishes. By examining *Arrow of God* in conjunction with theories of postcolonial thought as well as postcolonial linguistic resistance, one is able to see that the novel refuses to yield to a Eurocentric ideal of literature and stubbornly asserts the importance of African culture in a global landscape.

The first use of an Igbo word in *Arrow of God* is decidedly an ‘explained’ use. Achebe writes that chief priest Ezeulu’s “*obi* was built differently from other men’s huts” (Achebe, 1964/2010, p. 2). A monolingual English-speaking reader can understand from surrounding context that *obi* means hut, but Achebe specifically does not use blatant and blunt translation methods. He does not say, ‘Ezeulu’s *obi*, or hut, was built differently...,’ he forces the reader to discern the semantic meaning later in the sentence. Achebe, if only for a second, leaves a Western reader who does not know Igbo, disoriented due to their own lack of understanding of African languages. The novel does this again when it says, “‘Here is a piece of *nzu*,’ [Ezeulu] said as he rolled the chalk towards his guest” (p. 62). *Nzu* is explained as chalk after a few words, but Achebe again does not choose to aid the reader instantly. A Western reader



sits with these sentences in discomfort, searching for the meaning, and only discerns it with their own interpretation efforts. As mentioned however, this classification system is a spectrum, and therefore there are also examples of Igbo in the novel that land somewhere in between 'explained' and 'elusive,' words that can be parsed but whose true meaning still remains relatively unknown. When Ezulu first goes to his household shrine, Achebe writes: "His *ikenga*, about as tall as a man's forearm, its animal horn as long as the rest of its human body, jostled with the faceless *okposi* of the ancestors" (p. 6). Here, there exists no explanatory words whatsoever, only incomplete visual descriptors. A non-Igbo speaking reader has the surrounding context of a religious practice to help them parse the meaning, as well as the fact that an *okposi* is something that is "carved" (p. 6) and can be 'faceless,' but these definitions are not as clear as in previous examples. It is impossible for a Western reader to definitively know that an *ikenga* and an *okposi* are both religious idol-figures simply by reading this passage. We see this again with the line "But [Ugoye] was very pleased with the black patterns of *uli* and faint yellow lines of *ogalu* on her body" (p. 68). A non-Igbo speaker understands that the black *uli* and the yellow *ogalu* are

artistic designs on one's body, and that Ugoye has these markings because of a festival so they are presumably saved for special occasions, but the explanation ends there. Are these markings ink or paint based? Permanent or temporary? What is the Igbo art style that would act as the foundation for these patterns or designs? While using the words *uli* and *ogalu* would immediately bring to mind a specific kind of body art for those that know the language and cultural practices, Western readers are left with a vague picture that will never capture the true image of Ugoye's decorative techniques. This then leads us to the completely 'elusive' uses of Igbo words, Igbo used for concepts in which there is no English equivalent. A notable case of the 'elusive,' is Achebe's use of the word *chi*. The closest English translation for *chi* is 'personal god,' but that in no way encompasses everything that *chi* is. *Chi* can be challenged or heeded, as Ezeulu tells the men of Umuaro. It can be a force or deity that protects and punishes in equal measure. Ezeulu recalls a story in which a wrestler provoked the spirits, saying, "Rather than heed the call to go home he gave a challenge to the spirits to bring out their best and strongest wrestler. So they sent him his personal god, a little wiry spirit who seized him with one hand and smashed him on the stony earth" (p. 26). Yet Achebe

writes later, "Perhaps Nwaka counted on the protection of the personal god of his village" (p. 39), suggesting a benevolent side to *chi*. When Ezeulu says "But let us leave Akukalia aside; he has gone the way his *chi* ordained" (p. 26), *chi* is placed on the level of the individual, but with the later line "Umuaro is today challenging its *chi*" (p. 26), *chi* becomes as big as a collective village deity. Brown summarizes it best, saying:

"It becomes increasingly clear not only that there is no English equivalent for *chi*, but also that the concept itself is rather complex. The best that the reader can do is to conclude that *chi* refers to spiritual forces fully respected but not fully defined, to the mystery of human life and behavior, to the extrarational that seems involved in ideas of fate, fortune, and luck." (Brown, 1981, p. 82)

Despite all that a Western reader might desire, the true meaning of *chi* remains elusive for all except those who have an implicit understanding of Igbo. With Achebe's handling of the concept, there is no possible way to comprehend every connotation without external investigation. Using the word *chi* in such a way calls to an aspect of Igbo culture that relies on personal experience with the concept to grasp its depths, and such an experience is

not one a Western reader is likely to have.

One might be tempted to disregard the 'explained' uses of the Igbo language as unhelpful in any type of linguistic resistance. To explain an indigenous language to colonizers seems to do something closer to helping rather than rebelling against them. But Achebe, even through his explanations, refuses to abandon his postcolonial purpose. This is exemplified in how *Arrow of God* handles the *ogene*. The first time an *ogene* is mentioned is at the beginning of the novel, as Achebe writes, "[Ezeulu] beat his *ogene* GOME GOME GOME GOME" (Achebe, 1964/2010, p. 2). The reader then gets clarification a sentence later when Ezeulu puts "the stick back into the iron gong" (p. 2), explaining through context clues that an *ogene* is, in fact, an 'iron gong.' This particular kind of description continues throughout the novel. In Chapter Fourteen, Achebe writes, "Nwafo looked at the *ogene* which lay by the wall, the stick with which it was beaten showing at its mouth" (166), and in Chapter Seventeen an *ogene* is again referred to as a "metal gong" (p. 195). Yet, if a Western reader were to look at a picture of an *ogene* before they read Achebe's explanation, it is highly likely that they would describe it as akin to a large bell-like instrument rather than a gong. An



African (or more specifically, Igbo-speaking) reader would understand exactly what Achebe means by virtue of knowing the language; while a Westerner, relying on clarification, is likely to spend the whole novel imagining the kind of gong that originated in East/South Asia instead. What's important to recognize though, is that Achebe is not wrong when he describes an *ogene* this way. An *ogene* still fits the description of a metal percussion instrument that one plays with a stick, it's the details that vary from Western assumptions. Achebe writes with the Igbo language as if his readers will always implicitly understand exactly what he means, native Africans being the vast majority of those that would be able to do so. This sentiment holds true for the 'explained' examples mentioned above. An *obi* is, as Young puts it, "The special reception hut of the Ibo [sic] head of family" (Young, 1973, p. 32). There is a level of importance to an *obi* that is conveyed clearly in the Igbo language in which there exists a separate word for the specific kind of building. To call it a 'hut' in English however, invokes the image of a run-down shack-like building in a Western mind, rather than the true meaning. The same goes for *nzu* being translated as 'chalk.' When a Western reader imagines chalk, they are likely to picture the kind used on the sidewalk or a

blackboard. This does not match Achebe's prior description of "a lump of white clay" (Achebe, 1964/2010, p. 62), and thus the English translation is incomplete and inadequate. *Nzu* is chalk, and also it is not. An *obi* is a hut, but that's not all it is. The only people that would be able to understand *Arrow of God* in its truest form are those that speak Igbo, no matter how much of the general semantic meaning a Western reader might be able to parse. This is all to say that *Arrow of God* both does and does not aim to make the Igbo language understandable for a Western audience, but even when it entertains the notion of elucidation, it still refuses to submit to presumptions held by those with colonial-biased understandings of the world and its cultures.

While the presence of this specific use of Igbo words and the Igbo language undeniably exists, proving the presence alone says nothing of what exactly such a use of form accomplishes. To do that, I'd turn to the work of Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, specifically his commentary on Carl Jung's notion of the collective unconscious. Fanon criticizes Jung's conception by noting the lack of consideration for a non-white reality, and how what he might deem as neurologically universal is at once an

oversimplification and harmful. Fanon says, “Jung locates the collective unconscious in the inherited cerebral matter. But the collective unconscious, without our having to fall back on the genes, is purely and simply the sum of prejudices, myths, collective attitudes of a given group” (Fanon, 1967/2008, p. 145), and goes on to clarify that “The collective unconscious is not dependent on cerebral heredity; it is the result of what I shall call the unreflected imposition of a culture” (p. 147). To Fanon, the collective unconscious is not biological in nature, it is simply indicative of the values of the dominant culture. One can see these ideas mirrored in Ngugi wa Thiong’O’s “The Language of African Literature,” though with the added aspect of language as an inherent facet of culture. He says that “Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (Ngugi, 2007, p. 293), which manages to tether the collective unconscious (‘the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world’) to culture, and then culture to language. Furthermore, when Fanon says that “An Antillean is made white by the collective unconscious” (Fanon, 1967/2008, p. 149), he is effectively declaring that the

collective unconscious—as well as the presiding culture and its language—is inherently white, and therefore evaluates the merit of lives with the context of European colonization. Fanon, taken together with Ngugi, creates a collective unconscious that judges the worth of any given culture and/or language by the standards of a white European colonial force. Thus, African literature and language must contend with a communal attitude that fosters hostility and loathing towards any expression of humanity that does not fit within a white colonial framework. Any African author is writing to an audience—both in and outside of the continent—that holds the English language as the foundation for culture and worthy collective knowledge.

Arrow of God, for its part, refutes that premise. It faces an audience that subliminally and unconsciously (or actively and consciously, depending on the level of bigotry) holds English and its accompanying values as an indication of worth, and proves their nescience. *Arrow of God* exemplifies the attitude of the early contemporary African writers who understood that culture and knowledge were used as instruments of control by their colonizers, and thus, decided to pick up those same tools to retaliate against their oppressors (Ugor, 2024). This specific use of

the Igbo language manages to reverse the power dynamic between colonizer and colonized, showcasing a situation in which the 'lesser' African people hold knowledge that the 'enlightened' Western world does not. The novel forces its Western English speaking readers to carry that same burden of learning, weighing them down with their own ignorance in regards to the Igbo culture in much the same way that colonial forces do to colonized populations with Western and European ideals. It evokes the African history of involuntary bilingualism, and uses it to shatter preconceived notions of total Western superiority. A collective unconscious, a ubiquitous judgement system, cannot be founded on Western standards alone, because that contradicts the way Igbo is treated in *Arrow of God*. If the white collective unconscious is an unquestionable authority, then why is there a veritable body of African knowledge that is used in such a way that it assumes the automatic understanding of its intricacies and lexicon? Why can African readers understand the text—the English text—in a way that Western readers cannot? Why are those that hold Western knowledge left on the outskirts of understanding? If the white collective unconscious exists as an unquestionable authority, then why can African culture supplant

it?

Achebe continues to subvert widespread deception peddled by colonial powers simply by including the Igbo language in *Arrow of God* at all. Of course, if language is “both a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (Ngugi, 2007, p. 291), then the presence of a language will always mean the presence of a culture. Culture, meanwhile, stands very specifically as an indication of humanity, and therefore worth. Erasing the language and a culture of a community erases everything that makes them human, and colonial forces understand this implicitly. Cultural control was a common tactic used to subjugate Indigenous populations, as colonizing nations spun a narrative of a 'dark' and 'barren' Africa filled with 'beasts' rather than people—a narrative that still, in many ways, persists today (Ugor, 2024). If Africans do not have culture, then they are not human, and if they are not human, they can be exterminated with impunity. The mere fact that Igbo words even exist in *Arrow of God*, is an unflinching attestation to the humanity of the Igbo, as well as indigenous Africans as a whole. Not only that, but the presence of Igbo undermines the blanket success of the aforementioned colonial tactics. Ngugi says that “[t]he domination of a people’s



language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised” (Ngugi, 2007, p. 294), but what we can see in *Arrow of God* is a language that isn’t fully dominated. Igbo words peek through the cracks of a presumed monolithic English, and prove that the attempts to kill the language, to kill the culture, to kill the *people*, have decidedly failed. I picture European colonial forces plastering a domineering English over the native tongue, never to be seen or heard again. Yet despite attempts to the contrary, something still lives and breathes beneath the surface. Igbo words puncture through the covered and bound pages of English literature with an unmatched strength of will, claiming their authority and importance all the while. The presence of the Igbo language makes colonial claims as to the lack of African humanity impossible to substantiate, while simultaneously subverting the image of colonizing nations as all-powerful. Igbo as a language lives, and, like its people, will not bow down to the forces that threaten it.

Though for all this essay has claimed about Achebe and *Arrow of God* as a postcolonial work that rejects and supplants English, I would be remiss not to mention that Achebe does stand as a famous proponent for the value of

English in African literature. In his essay, “The African Writer and the English Language,” Achebe continuously champions English as a method of communicating African existences in spite of its history. He claims that:

“Those of us who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. Or we may go on resenting it because it came as part of a package deal which included many other items of doubtful value and the positive atrocity of racial arrogance and prejudice, which may yet set the world on fire. But let us not in rejecting the evil throw out the good with it.” (Achebe, 1975, p. 96)

This is a stark contrast to the attitude of other African critics, namely Obiajunwa Wali and Ngugi wa Thiong’O. In “The Dead End of African Literature?” Wali says contemporary African literature written in colonial languages “lacks any blood or stamina, and has no means of self-enrichment” (Wali, 2007, p. 282). He believes the practice exclusionary, and that “The ordinary local audience, with little or no education in the conventional European manner, and who constitute an overwhelming majority, has no chance at participating in this kind of literature” (p. 282).

However, *Arrow of God* seems to align more with the perspectives of Ngugi and Wali, despite Achebe's proclaimed stance. Even if it is written in English, *Arrow of God* speaks to the local population in ways that a Western audience cannot appreciate. Its use of Igbo does not capitulate to a canon that relies on English understanding. Writing about *Arrow of God*, Bawa Kammampool claims that Achebe "succeeds in embellishing a foreign language with local idioms" (Kammampool, 2022, p. 33), but this way of analyzing the Igbo language seems to reinforce the understanding that English is in some way more worthy of development. As Thiong'o asks: "Why...should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed by taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues?" (Thiong'o, 2007, p. 288). English, globally pervasive as it is, certainly does not need to take more from the cultures it aims to quash. Brown says that "the African writer who uses words from his language so that they not only do not obtrude but also become at least generally clear to the monolingual English reader has achieved artistry" (p. 69), but is that really true? Should the worth of an African language in literature rely on how easily it can be digested and spun into English comprehension? Should artistry be defined by how well art yields to the sensibilities of a

dominant colonial audience?

Despite all my posturing, I hesitate to end this essay with my own final opinion as to the value of the English language in African literature. Both because I—as a native English speaker born and raised in North America—will always selfishly hold somewhat of a bias in favour of the only language I can understand, and also because I don't believe I actually have the right to volunteer such a definitive opinion. I write in the context of a society intent on embracing colonization-based globalization no matter the cost, and such a collective requires a level of unified communication that is founded on oppression. However, it must be acknowledged that this oppressive attempt at unified communication is the only reason that I can read *Arrow of God*, as well as the work of any African author mentioned thus far. A violent and cruel history is the very reason this essay exists. I have to question my right to stand on this soapbox if my understanding of African literature and literary criticism relies on this argued "unassailable position of English in our literature" (Ngugi, 2007, p. 287). As Achebe says, "There is certainly a great advantage to writing in a world language" (Achebe, 1975, p. 97), yet I feel that my fellow Western contemporaries and I are the sole

benefactors. I can advocate for African languages all I'd like, but I'm still doing so in colonial English, I'm still a beneficiary of colonial practices. I have to wonder if Wali, Ngugi, and those that feel as they do, would read this essay and be repulsed by my attempts at solidarity. Truly, I couldn't blame them if they were. Admittedly, I don't exactly know where to go from here. I have no clear cut answer to preach. It is extremely likely that my voice will simply become another drop in the ocean of debates surrounding the English language in African Literature—and maybe that's how it was always meant to be. This essay cannot and will not provide a judgement on the English language from the perspective of a monolingual English speaking North American, and I don't believe it should. What it can do however, is provide a reading of Achebe's *Arrow of God* that demonstrates how one can subvert a colonial medium in favour of African prioritization. The use of Igbo in the novel rejects English as a worshipped monolith, and proves that despite all that has been and is still being done to try and completely ruin Africa in the name of colonization and white superiority, African culture still lives. It still thrives. A hut does not have to be a hut, it can be an *obi* instead.

