

Sacred Transgression and the Dynamics of Tragedy in *When the Arrow Rebounds*

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Abstract: *The literature of West Africa offers the most passionate expression of the colonial confrontation with the African traditional values as well as the consequences of these confrontations. Many African writers are therefore committed to the depiction of African history which is human deeds and experiences that lie in the past in their works. In this historical process, two categories of actors were involved: The African Igbos and the Europeans who represent the invaded and the invaders respectively. This work explores how Igbo spirituality and religious life die an ignominious death when confronted by Christianity which is backed by the Whiteman's military and political power. Drawing on postcolonial and sacred theories, the study interrogates how the disruption of sacred order through missionary incursion and colonial administration lead to cultural disintegration in Umuaro. The colonial administrators set the tragedy in motion and left Umuaro to destroy its own god in destroying their chief priest. Ezeulu watches helplessly as the old order at whose head he is, disintegrates and is swept aside. Ezeulu falls after the death of his favourite son, Obika, dragging along with him, Ulu and his clan. By situating Ezeulu's downfall within the broader socio-religious break caused by colonialism, the study reveals how imposed modernity destabilizes indigenous knowledge and beliefs. The analysis contributes to ongoing debates on religion, power, and identity in African literature.*

Keywords: tragedy, Igbo religion, sacred transgression, Arrow of God, *When the Arrow Rebounds*, colonialism

INTRODUCTION

African literature has been defined as a literature which aims to express the African sensibility by depicting the African experiences. Today, African literature still recollects the things of the past. It is a mirror that depicts the African experience. Scholars increasingly view it as a site where competing epistemologies: indigenous and Western are negotiated (Okuyade, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). One of such experiences is culture contact and conflict. The implication of this

contact has been the concern of most writers. Walter Rodney (1985) observes that as a result of this conflict, the lesser writers have been content with a general presentations of typical incompatibilities but the better writers have dug deeper and attempted to determine the specific implications of this conflict for particular African communities. Emeka Nwanueze belongs to the group of better writers referred to by Rodney. His primary concern in *When the Arrow Rebounds* is to dramatize the consequences of the contact between the western values and the traditional values of Umuaro, an imaginary Igbo traditional society. It is an attempt to explore through dramatic action, the level of tragedy experienced by the Igbo traditional society and religion as a result of colonialism.

When the Arrow Rebounds is Nwabueze's dramatized recreation of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*. Michael Echeruo summarizes *Arrow of God* thus, "*Arrow of God* (...) tells three stories in one integrated style: the trial of Ezeulu, the disintegration of the indigenous political and religious order in Umuaro and the establishment of British rule and the Christian religion" (Cited in Ola 1996).

When the Arrow Rebounds analyses Ezeulu's perception of the sociopolitical dynamism in Umuaro and his conception of his own experience with the White men. The play centres on how Ezeulu confronts the colonial powers and the missionaries. The central conflict revolves around the struggle between continuity and change manifested in the Ezeulu's refusal to be no man's chief except Ulu and Oduche's who accepts Christianity. The play is set in the fictional Umuaro village in Igbo community of British Nigeria in the 1920s. The play opens with the festival of the pumpkin leaves in honour of Ulu, a deity worshiped by the six villages of Umuaro. Ulu is a god created by the people of umuaro in a time of crisis to rule over the individual gods of the six federated villages and thereby increase the security of the loose federation. Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, is invited by Wintabota to become a part of the British Indirect Rule as a warrant chief. Ezeulu's refusal lands him in prison. His absence affects his traditional duties and triggers many developments that lead to the fall of Umuaro traditional values. As a chief priest Ezeulu is responsible for safeguarding the traditions and rituals of the people. For example, he watches each month for the new moon; only he can name the day of the new yam festival, this he does after he has finished eating the sacred yams. Ezeulu refuses to eat the three remaining sacred yams after he returns from prison despite the pleas of the elders. The delay of the festival causes severe suffering for the people who cannot harvest their yams until after the new yam festival which must be called by Ezeulu.

Mr Good Country, the Christian catechist sees this as an opportunity and proposes that the villagers offer thanks to the Christian God who will in turn protect them from the wrath of Ulu. Having reached their breaking point, the villagers convert to Christianity, and attend the Christian harvest.

Consequently, Ezeulu watches the disintegration of the tradition he wishes to preserve; the death of his favorite son Obika and the loss of his sanity.

Nwabueze like Achebe has displayed a sense of history in recreation of Igbo history in dramatic forms. He takes a closer look at the interaction between the Igbos and British colonisers as well as what consequences these actions have. The consequences are summarised in G.T. Basden's words. Basden,(1966) a missionary who lived and worked in Igboland similarly notes that, native law and custom received its death blow when the British Administration became operative in the Ibo country (...) what passes for native law and custom is but a travesty of what it was in the old days; it is but shell, the kernel has been destroyed.

This paper discusses the sacred in Igbo traditional society and the tragic consequences of violation of the sacred caused by the contact with the white colonisers as portrayed by Nwabueze in *When the Arrow Rebounds*. This study adopts a postcolonial theoretical framework alongside Durkheim's concept of the sacred and profane (Durkheim, 1912/2008) to argue that tragedy in the play arises from the desecration of sacred structures that once guaranteed communal equilibrium.

The Sacred in Igbo Traditional Religion and Society

Religion and religious belief of the Igbos are keys to understanding their worldview and ideology (Kanu, 2019). Worldview is a common concept of reality shared by a particular group of people usually referred to as culture. It embodies the total value system of a people of which they are familiar with. The introduction of a strange form of culture creates conflict with dire consequences which can lead to serious tragedy. Many African writers like J. A. Sofola and Oliver Onwubiko have identified and discussed African cultural values. The values reflected in their different works are:

- i. Community life
- ii. Respect for elders
- iii. Hospitality
- iv. Sense of good relations i.e. live and let live philosophy
- v. Sense of the sacred and of religion and
- vi. Sense of the sacredness of life. A closer look at three of the values will be undertaken below.

1. Community life: the African (Igbo) idea of security and its value depends on personal identification within the community. Living together and the sense of communality are the basis

of and the expression of the extended family in Africa. Onwubiko (1991) emphasises that the authentic African is known and identified in, by and through his community. The community is the custodian of the individual, hence he must go where the community goes.

2. Hospitality: this is one of the African values that are still alive, even till date. The Igbos easily incorporate strangers and give them land to settle hoping that they would go one day and the land would revert to the owner. No Igbo man can opt out of his original community completely so they did not imagine that others could. Today, even the corpse of an Igbo man must be brought back to his native land no matter where he died or whatever it costs.

3. Another important cultural value is the sense of religion and sense of the sacred. Life, objects, spaces, and persons are imbued with spiritual significance. No Igbo man is an atheist because in Igbo traditional religion, there is a belief in the Supreme Being called by various indigenous names among many Igbo communities. These names manifest the Igbos' ideas and concepts of Him namely, *Chukwu*: 'The Big God'; *Chineke*: 'God the Creator'; *Osebuluwa*: 'God, Who Sustains the earth'. The different attributes of this Supreme Being is also reflected in the traditional Igbo names even before contact with western civilisation. For example, *Ifeanyichukwu* shows the Omnipotence of God: *Chukwuebuka* shows His Omniscience because His 'Bigness' ensures He covers the entire universe. Besides Chukwu, the Igbos believe in the existence of other supernatural beings (spirits or deities). In some cases, they are natural and are regarded as the most powerful and superhuman, while in some, they are viewed as the establishment of the community. The deities are localised, usually with shrines and priests who organised rituals and sacrifices to them. Nlenanya Onwu (1996) confirms the above when he said that Related to the belief in Chi are belief in lesser deities which include Ani, Ifejioku, Amadioha, Ogwugwu, Agbala and Idemmili. These deities constitute the dominant feature of Igbo religious cult. Some of them are personification of natural forces and phenomena while others are man-made for the people's survival or wellbeing. They are seen as intermediaries between God and man and elieved to protect the community and the individual in the areas they exist.

There are public and personal deities. These deities have different origins, temperament and functions. They are mysterious and thus have respect or reverence in the community. Personal deities include Ikenga, Chi, etc. The Igbos believe that everybody has his own Chi who controls the person's destiny and life.

Oguejiofor, J. Obi (1996) points out that a peoples' worldview is generally discernible from their festivals, rituals, folklores, etc. In Igbo traditional society, festivals are celebrated with specific aims or aims in view and as such, they have some beliefs necessarily attached to them. The rites and rituals of festivals are expressions of their deep religiosity. G. W. Macrae (n.d.) observes that

feasts are the external manifestation of religion itself in every culture, and they very often include sacrifices as a prominent part of their ritual. Feasts and festivals are common features of not only Igbo traditional religion but also of other world religions and cultures. They are occasions for commemorating certain events which are of importance to the celebrating community. The Christians for instance celebrate Christmas and Easter to commemorate the birth and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ respectively.

Sacrifices are important in Igbo religion. Rituals, sacrifices, and festivals serve as mechanisms for maintaining cosmic balance. As recent scholarship notes, African ritual systems function as “technologies of social continuity” (Mbiti, 2015; Olupona, 2022). They are offered to ward off evil spirits and to placate an enraged deity or ancestor; to ask for favour or a blessing from ancestors, spirits or deities; or to show appreciation for received blessings or favour. It is believed that to be efficacious, sacrifices must be offered at particular spots, by particular persons and at a particular time of the market day or week. Onwubiko (1991) highlights the importance of timing in African sacrifices, for according to him, there are two concepts of time in relation to sacrifice in African religion. There are concepts of time which correspond to the moment a particular spirit or deity eats or the moment the efficacy of the sacrifice is believed to be realised (...) it is also important to note that chronological reckonings are associated with the concept of which determine periodical rituals and sacrifices. The neglect at such times to offer the stipulated sacrifices is believed to cause the anger of the gods and ancestors.

Additionally, the sense and respect of the sacred is an important religious and cultural value in Igbo traditional society. This aligns with Durkheim’s notion that the sacred constitutes the moral foundation of society. There are objects and places regarded as sacred because of their uses and importance in their religion and culture. The shrine of deities, some streams and rivers with the fish in them; religious symbols like *Ofo*, *Ikenga* are sacred. Some animals and trees are totemic and thus sacred. Some persons are sacred too. These are religious personnel in Igbo religion, that is, the priests or priestesses who lead the community in religious matters and through rituals, sacrifices, prayers, etc. protect the community and remove obstacles for it in its dealings with the spirit world. They act as intermediaries between the people and their deities. A sense of awe surrounds the religious personnel because they are seen as quasi manifestation of the divine and as such they are handled and approached with reference and deference. Christopher Dawson (1949) explains that the institution of priesthood has a twofold origin. On the one hand, the priest is the servant of the god, the minister of the temple and diviner who ascertains the divine will and decree. On the other hand, he is the master of the sacrifice without whose power and knowledge the sacred rites cannot be performed. He is the bridge builder, the guardian of the threshold between the world of men and the world of the gods. It is in his power to open and close

the channels by which divine blessings are conferred on the community so that he himself comes to share in some measure in the power and prestige of the gods.

This was the Igbo cultural and religious environment in the pre-colonial era. The Igbos had an indigenous culture and religion, an indigenous system of government, system of maintaining law and order but the arrival of the colonisers led to not just usurpation of those values but also to assimilation of western values and belief and consequently to the eventual loss of the Igbo cultural and religious identity.

This study draws on two frameworks:

1. Durkheim Sacred Theory: posits that the sacred in a society is a concentrated form, where the collective power of society is felt and experienced during religious rituals and ceremonies. His theory focuses on how religious beliefs, symbols and practices contribute to social cohesion and the collective consciousness of society and how sacred things function to unite people and maintain social order. The sacred consists of things that are set apart and forbidden. They are imbued with a special significance that elevates them above the ordinary. Durkheim further argues that the sacred does not inherently possess divine or supernatural qualities but becomes sacred because the concerned society collectively invests it with special meaning. (Jones, 1986).

It is important to note that every religion constructs its own version of sacred because it is not universal across all cultures and violation of the sacred destabilizes collective consciousness and leads to social breakdown.

2. Postcolonial Theory: critiques the Western-centric worldview imposed by colonial powers, which often marginalized and silenced the voices of colonized peoples. The intellectual groundwork for this field is often traced to thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha, whose writings explore the cultural and psychological consequences of imperial domination. Fanon's reflections, particularly in *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, remain especially influential for their attention to the interior dimensions of colonialism—how it reshapes self-perception, producing alienation as well as resistance. In a related vein, more recent scholarship has emphasized colonialism as a form of epistemic disruption, one that unsettles and often displaces indigenous knowledge systems (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 2018).

Within this framework, tragedy in *When the Arrow Rebounds* is not Aristotelian in the narrow sense of individual hamartia; rather, what unfolds in Umuaro is better understood as a form of structural tragedy, emerging from the uneasy encounter between competing worldviews that

cannot be easily reconciled (Fanon, 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). The resulting crisis is therefore not confined to Ezeulu alone; it implicates the entire community.

Sacred Transgression and the Dynamics of Tragedy in *When the Arrow Rebounds*

Umuaro is an imaginary traditional Igbo village. For the entire clan, there was no separation of religion from society. They were one and the same. The result is that traditions dictate the lives of the people of Umuaro. Seasons are punctuated by rituals and festivals and are managed by the priests of the various deities: Idemmili, Eru, Udo, Ogwugwu and Ulu associated with each village. The people endeavour to keep the relationship between man and these deities as cordial as possible through various actions both as a community and as individuals. These actions are manifested in consultation with the oracles to get the opinion of these deities; performing rituals and expiatory, petitive and thanksgiving sacrifices to them; and celebration of different feasts or festivals in their honour: for instance, the Pumpkin leaves and the New Yam festivals.

The play *When the Arrow Rebounds* opens with the annual ritual of the pumpkin leaves where thousands of Umuaro women drop the evils and misfortunes of their household in the form of bunches of pumpkin leaves at the shrine of Ulu for burial. Ulu, as a unifying deity, embodies collective identity.

The importance of this ritual is evident in Ugoye's opening speech in the play:

UGOYE: Great Ulu who kills and saves, we implore you to cleanse our household of all defilement. Whether we have spoken it with our mouth or seen it with our eyes, or if we have heard it with our ears or stepped on it with our foot, or if it had come through our children or our friends or kinfolk, let it follow these leaves. (10)

Ezeulu also reveals the purifying and protective power of Ulu over his people:

EZEULU: Who covers our abomination with his huge feet?

ALL: Ulu!

EZEULU: Who vanquished the hired soldiers of Abam?

ALL: Great Ulu! (11)

Ulu provides the important purification and thus continuous protection of the people of Umuaro. Ezeulu is the chief priest of Ulu, the founding and principal deity of Umuaro. His function in *When the Arrow Rebounds* is very revealing. His priestly function involves acting as a mediator between

Umuaro and Ulu and thus ensuring the welfare of the community. He also functions as a victim and a scape-goat which is evident in the ritual of pumpkin leaves. This scape-goatism is further revealed when Udeozo said:

UDEOZO: Ezeulu, it was right that the chief priest should go ahead and confront anger before it reaches his people. That's the responsibility of his priesthood. It has been like that from the first day when the six harassed villages of Umuaro got together and implored Ezeulu's ancestors to carry the great deity for us (...) (53).

Umuaro had an indigenous culture, values and religion before the coming of the Whiteman. Their spirituality and religion dies an ignominious death when confronted by Christianity which is backed by the Whiteman's military and religious power.

Two major forces are to be blamed for the sacred transgression and tragedy in Umuaro traditional society: The Christian missionaries and the colonial masters. According to Elizabeth Isichei (1977), the history of Christianisation of Igbo land began in 1841 when Simon Jonas, an Igbo who had been sold into slavery and rescued and settled in Sierra Leone, spent three weeks at Abo and preached to children who flocked around him. But the first permanent mission in Igbo land was established at Onitsha in 1857 under the leadership of Reverend John Christopher Taylor who was born in Sierra Leone of Igbo parentage.

Most of the missionaries had the notion that Africans were not a religious people; therefore to found the church in Nigeria, they believed that the indigenous culture and religion must be suppressed and replaced by the western expression of Christianity. The missionaries were ignorant of the religious customs of umuaro, which they labelled as the worship of the devil. Reverend Father Jordan in his classic book on Bishop Shanahan's mission in Prefecture of the Lower Niger has this to say, "(...) the idea was to form a Christian village centred on the church and father's house. According as people embraced the true faith, they were induced to build a hut for themselves off as far as possible from pagan influences. These influences were certainly considerable, because everything in native life from the cradle to the grave bore the stamp of false worship. (cited in Nwosu, 1982, 41)

Christian missionaries initiate the first rupture by denouncing indigenous religion as pagan. Their strategy reflects what scholars describe as cultural absolutism (Sanneh, 2016). Worthy of note is the terminologies used to qualify Christianity and the Igbo traditional religion: true faith and false worship respectively. Thus, the missionaries rarely made any efforts to understand the beliefs of the people. Nwabueze (2005) observes that the early missionaries were unwilling to consider the

efficacy of traditional religion. Rather, they believed that the quickest way of converting the natives was to make a frontal attack on their traditional life, religion and culture.

Many communities initially did not want the missionaries to stay, so when they wanted to settle, they were given lands in the evil forest. That the people thought that the missionaries will die have tended to dominate the reason behind giving them the evil forest so much that the crucial role of the evil forest in traditional Igbo society: the burying place for the abominable, the outcasts etc. seems to be forgotten. It becomes obvious that the missionaries were welcomed because as pointed out earlier, the Igbos are a very hospitable people. It has been already been said that no Igbo man can opt out of his original community completely. As a result, they easily incorporate strangers and give them lands, hoping that they would go one day. But they were mistaken, because the missionaries have come to stay permanently. They established schools which are believed to have facilitated the Christianisation of Igbo land.

The schools were a means of evangelisation not only because catechism was taught as part of the curriculum but also because the village school building more often than not, served as the church for worship on Sundays. The missionaries were forced to turn to children who were still tender and therefore pliable, because they observed that the Christianisation of the adult Igbos will be difficult as they have already solidified their traditional norms. At first, only the slaves, the weak and the stupid were sent to school but as time went on, the people realised that the new trend had something in it, 'real sons' were sent to join. Ezeulu sent his son Oduche to church to be his eyes among those people because he believes that the world is changing. He tells his son Edogo:

EZEULU: Yes I want one of my sons to be with these people. If there is nothing in it, he will come back. But if there is something, he will bring home my share. The world is like a mask, dancing. If you want to see it well, you don't stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who don't befriend the Whitman today will regret it later. (25)

Generally, the missionaries through the schools and the churches teach the school children and new converts to disregard traditional laws and customs. The symbolic climax of this intrusion is the attempted killing of the sacred python, an act that constitutes profound sacrilege. Goodcountry told his converts to destroy everything our Lord hates:

GOODCOUNTRY: (...) our example should start with the python. You address the sluggish python as father. It's nothing but a snake that deceived our first mother Eve. If you afraid to kill it, do not call yourself a Christian. (18).

He went further to incite them by telling them to “Go kill the python, the python is our enemy. Destroy the python as Adam did and the good Lord will reward you” (22) Nwabueze (2005) rightly notes that the idea of sending children to find out the mysteries of the European religion later became a problem for the Igbos since the children sent were not content with serving as representatives of their families. Rather, they embraced the colonial education and religion with pride and satisfaction. Thus, the Igbos watch with amazement as their children gradually became assimilated into alien culture and began to question the authenticity of Igbo culture and belief.

Oduche’s role is particularly significant. His internalization of missionary ideology illustrates what Bhabha (1994/2012) terms colonial mimicry, a condition where the colonized subject adopts and reproduces the values of the colonizer, often destabilizing indigenous structures from within. Oduche as a child whose traditional norms have not yet been solidified was influenced by Goodcountry’s teaching. The resultant effect is transgression against Idemmili, the sky deity and its emanation, the sacred python. Christianity deals its first blow to Umuaro culture and religion when Oduche imprisons the python in his box in order to kill it later. That an abomination and a grave transgression against the sacred have been committed is not debatable. But, there were no prescribed sanctions for any man who kills or attempts to harm the python consciously for it was not conceivable that any Umuaro man will ever try to do that. For that reason, Ezeulu argues that, because there is no punishment in the custom of Umuaro for the man who puts the snake into a box, “it is a kind of offence, which a man puts right between himself and his personal god” (30). Open hostilities ensued between Ezeulu and Ezeidemili thereby widening the tragic canvas into a confrontation on the one hand and Ezeidemili and Nwaka on the other.

The colonial administrator whose primary concern was the expansion of a European empire saw social transformation and culture change as necessary to achieving his aim. He began to set up his own pattern of administration because he felt that there was none. He considered it necessary and important to institute a body of persons who would see to his interests and to the effective execution of his orders. This led to the birth of the Warrant Chieftaincy. The introduction of the Warrant Chief system represents a second layer of transgression. By imposing authority devoid of cultural legitimacy, colonial administration undermines traditional governance (Afigbo, 2018).

Captain Wintabottom’s miscalculation in offering Ezeulu the honour of the Warrant Chief sets in motion the final tragic movement of the play. Initially, Ezeulu’s summon by Wintabottom to come to Okperi is refused by him, because he believes in his culture and respects it. According to Umuaro custom, a chief priest is not supposed to leave his hut to travel for so long a distance. Nwokeke asks, “How can the chief priest leave his hut? An abomination is creeping into Umuaro!” (40) Ezeulu’s refusal of the offer of the warrant chief by Tony Clark, Wintabottom’s assistant lands Ezeulu in prison. Onwubiko (1991) was right to point out that the warrant chief as an organ of

maintaining peace and order, was not as in the traditional African community, backed by religious and cultural sanctions. He could neither authenticate his claim to office with myths nor appeal to traditional political systems in Africa. His rule was, by definition and implication, a rule without traditional and cultural basis; worse still, he had no ritual and effective checks to abuse of authority and power.

Hence, Ezeulu could not imagine himself being a warrant chief and his answer to the offer is that, “Ezeulu will not be anybody’s chief except Ulu” (49).

The colonial administrator deals a huge blow to Umuaro religion and culture, violating the sacred by detaining Ezeulu in prison for thirty-two days. In Igbo religion, the religious personnel i.e. the priests of the deities are considered sacred. His incarceration sets in motion the complication that led to the tragedy in the play. His detention prevents him from performing the most important of his religious duties: reckoning of times and seasons and offering of sacrifices to Ulu, hence the tragic consequences. Umuaro custom has it that at the appearance of every new moon, Ezeulu eats one yam from a stock of 13 sacred yams from the previous harvest and offers sacrifices to Ulu. The 12th yam signals the arrival of Umuaro’s most important annual feast: the New Yam festival. During his detention, this ritual is forsaken together with Ezeulu’s daily sacrifice to Ulu. Three surplus yams have accumulated by the time Clark releases him. Consequently, Ezeulu cannot announce the date for the new yam festival when due. When the elders of Umuaro came to Ezeulu to find out why the date has not been announced, Ezeulu responds:

EZEULU: (...) you all know what our custom is, I only call a new festival when only one yam is left from the last. Today, I have three yams left and so I know that the time has not yet come for the feast. (62)

He also tells them what Ulu’s annoyance is:

EZEULU: I won’t hide anything from you. Ulu did say that two new moons came and went and there was no one to break kola nut to him and Umuaro kept silent.

Ezeulu’s refusal to eat the remaining yams in one day and name the day of the next harvest as requested by the elders is the climax of the encounter. It is the point at which a great dislocation has occurred in the affairs of Umuaro, it is a point of no return, the people’s religion and culture is thus headed to total destruction. Meanwhile, the people suffocate over the delay in harvesting the yams. Overwhelmed and frustrated, they decide to turn to the Christian religion as their sanctuary, having learnt that anyone who offers his sacrifice to the Christian God is free from Ulu’s vengeance and can therefore harvest his yams. Ezeulu’s discovery and realisation of his mistake was when

Akuebue informs him that the Christian harvest is next Eke and he murmurs, “Ah, too late, too late!”

Ezeulu has been criticised severally for sending one of his sons to church, but Ezeulu’s intention is clear – his son should be his eyes among them. It is important to point out here that Oduche who was sent to be the ‘eyes and ears’ of his father among the Christians was supposed to inform Ezeulu, so that Ezeulu could keep pace with the rate of change, control and direct it. Had Oduche done his duty in this regard, Ezeulu, Ulu and Umuaro would have been spared. But Oduche failed, and this omission paves the way for the final tragedy.

The death of Ezeulu’s favourite son, Obika is further compounded by the rejection of Ulu and his chief priest by Umuaro for not only the ordinary but even titled elders of Umuaro like Nwaka attended the Christian harvest. Ulu dies and is replaced by the Christian God. This shift marks the transfer of sacred legitimacy from indigenous religion to colonial Christianity. Ezeulu’s subsequent psychological breakdown reflects what Fanon describes as the “internal collapse of colonized consciousness” (Fanon, 2004).

CONCLUSION

When the Arrow Rebounds offers a powerful reflection on the fragility of sacred systems under colonial pressure. The play demonstrates that tragedy arises not solely from individual failure but from the violent disruption of a coherent worldview. Igbo traditional religion has been grossly misconceived by the colonialists. This misconception is apparent in the terminologies wrongly applied to it: paganism, devilish, etc. The colonial masters did not make any effort to understudy or to understand the people’s belief. If they had, they would have discovered that Igbo culture is not in any way resistant to change, for life in their society is based on the philosophy of live and let live which can only succeed through compromise, tolerance and accommodation. This oversight made the ‘invaders’ aim at creating a completely new social order which would wipe away the institutions and customs of the traditional Igbo man. Umuaro culture and religion which was previously self-sufficient begins to disintegrate in the face of the onslaught from the culture and religion of the Europeans who are militarily and politically more powerful.

The missionaries and the colonial administrators set the tragedy in motion and left Umuaro to destroy its own god in destroying their chief priest. The tragedy of Umuaro is hence reflected in the tragedy of Ezeulu. When we see him a demented high priest at the end, it is clear that the society itself is in confusion, for the former traditional solidarity has been broken.

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