

The Representation of War in Chinua Achebe's Novel, *Arrow of God*

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Abstract: This article analyzes the representation of war in Chinua Achebe's novel *Arrow of God*. In fact, the pre-colonial period remains marked by several capital social facts. By doing so, the land war is one of the most important facts of the pre-colonial era, hence the major interest that the author has on this theme in the writing of his masterpiece. Several endogenous and exogenous factors essentially constitute the root causes of the manifestation of war. Internal social disputes and the land conflict are undoubtedly the real factors that triggered the war in the novel under study. Consequently, this fratricidal war has resulted in the loss of several human lives of antagonistic people. The macabre balance sheet shows several deaths on both sides. The saving action of the colonizer has considerably contributed to pacify the warring peoples. For this reason, peace, tranquility and stability is made possible by the effective intervention of the colonizer. Thus, the great period of turmoil, instability and fighting is giving way to the new era of reconciliation, solidarity and living together.

Keywords: Arrow of God, Chinua Achebe, Colonization, Era of Reconciliation, Representation of War

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Introduction

The novel made a considerable contribution to the realization of colonial ambitions during the colonization of African continent. Novels mainly written by Westerners, Americans and Asians produced texts designed to categorize clumsily Africans and their way of life within a colonial logic. These include Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*. Due to the negative impact of these novels on Africans mentality, several authors from formerly colonized countries have taken the historic initiative of writing texts that represent the African people from a realistic rather than idealistic perspective.

Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian writer born on 16 November 1930 in Ogidi and who died on 21 March 2013 in Boston in the United States, is one of a group of African authors who have railed against the stereotypical portrayal of Africans in fiction. Achebe's exclusive focus on Africa, its people and its local culture in his novels makes him an undisputed pioneer of African literature. Following this dynamic, Benon Tugume, in his article entitled *How the Center Cannot Hold in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: Objectification and Alienation of Children*, argues that "Chinua Achebe is considered by many African literary scholars as the father of the African novel". In other words, for scholars, Chinua Achebe remains the precursor of African literature.

In all, Chinua Achebe has written and published five novels. However, for the purposes of this article we will be analyzing *Arrow of God*¹. In this work, the author tackles themes as rich as they are varied, such as colonization, religion, yam festival, dowry, war and many others. Indeed, the originality of the themes mentioned in his novels is almost entirely due to the fact that the author draws his inspiration from the real life of Igbo people when writing his literary texts. The same is true of the representation of the land war in his novel, which is undoubtedly the transcription of a real Igbo social fact into the world of fiction. The following questions may therefore be asked: how does Chinua Achebe represent the land war in his novel, *Arrow of God*? Or does the representation of war make it possible to lift the veil on an important

¹Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, London, Penguin Books, 2010. A partir de maintenant toutes les références relatives au corpus seront incluses dans le texte.

Igbo social fact from the pre-colonial period? With regard to these research questions, we will use the theory of representation as a method of analysis. Thus, there will be no question of returning to the question of the historicity of the theory of social representation. Although it is difficult to grasp the concept by the position it occupies « au carrefour d'une série de concepts sociologiques et d'une série de concepts psychologiques »². Nevertheless, the fact remains that there is a definition of the theory of representation. According to Alex Gagnon, « [La] représentation peut désigner la présentification d'une absence au moyen d'un langage »³. In other words, representation is the act of making a physical absence linguistically present. In the same vein, Benjamin Hrushovski and Anne Marie Moulin argue that:

Un texte littéraire n'est jamais pure fiction ou pure représentation, mais il tient de deux façons complexes. Pour comprendre ce qu'est fiction, on doit saisir la nature de la représentation et vice versa et les deux dépendent de la structure du sens et de la référence dans les textes littéraire ou non⁴.

In other words, a literary text is an amalgam of fiction and representation. There can be no fiction without representation, and vice versa. That said, it is important to set out the plan for our work. This article will be divided into two parts: on the one hand, we will show the underlying causes of the land war and, on the other, the course and process of resolution of the land conflict.

I-The Different Causes of War in *Arrow of God*

1-Village social rivalries

In *Arrow of God*, Umuaro is a village federation made up of six villages, Umuachala, Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezeani, Umuogwugwu and Umuisiuzo. The narrator explains how the village of Umuaro came to be:

In the very distant past, when lizards were still few and far between, the six villages, Umuachala, Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezeani, Umuogwugwu and Umuisiuzo- lived as different peoples, and each worshipped its own deity. Then the hired soldiers of Abame used to strike in the dead of night, set fire to the houses and carry men, women and children into slavery. Things were so bad for the six villages that their leaders came together to save themselves (p. 31).

When the six villages lived separately, they were constantly exposed to the assaults of Abame's soldiers, who systematically destroyed and emptied the villages from their inhabitants, reducing them to slavery. It is therefore important to point out that the creation of Umuaro undoubtedly meets an enormous need for security and unity. In Umuaro, Ezeulu is the main priest of Ulu, in charge of the spiritual and political aspects of the village. The heterogeneous origins of Umuaro naturally give rise to internal rivalries between the village's inhabitants. On this specific point, the narrator says this, "Every time [Ezeulu] prayed for Umuaro bitterness rose into his mouth, a great smouldering anger for the division which had come to the six villages and which his enemies sought to lay on his head (p.19)". In short, Ezeulu's enemies sought to hold him responsible for the current division of the six villages, which were once united and cohesive. This thought echoes that of Lame M. Kenalemang when he writes that: "The people of Umuaro become divided on their own without any external influences; this creates a very strong sense of hatred among them and the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood that once existed is lost"⁵. Although Umuaro was originally created so that the peoples of the various villages could live in union, solidarity,

²Carine Pianelli, Représentations sociales de la Vitesse chez les conducteurs et pratique du Limiteur s'Adaptant à la Vitesse Autorisée (LAVIA) : genèse d'une représentation sociale, dynamiques représentationnelles et relations entre représentations. Thèse de Doctorat, Université de Provence, 2008, p. 34

³Alex Gagnon, « Représentation », dans Anthony Glinoe et Denis Saint-Amand (dir.), *Le lexique socius*, URL : <http://ressources-socius.info/index.php/lexique/21-lexique/189-representation>, page consultée le 28 avril 2023, p. 1

⁴Benjamin Hrushovski et Anne Marie Moulin, Présentation et représentation dans la fiction littéraire, *Littérature*, N° 57, 1985, p.6

⁵Lame M. Kenalemang, *Things Fall Apart: An Analysis of Pre and Post Colonial Igbo Society*, Faculty Humanities and Social Science, 2013, p. 9

peace and security, the fact remains that they are now fundamentally divided, fragmented and separated due to internal disputes. As a result, the cardinal virtues that should normally characterize the people of Umuaro have now given way to hatred, discord, division and rivalry.

The people of Umuaro are no longer acting as one. The village is now deeply divided, with Ezeulu and his group on one side and Nwaka, the sworn enemy of Ezeulu and his gang, on the other. The narrator says: "Umuaro was divided in two. Many people gathered round Ezeulu and said they stood with him. But there were others who went with Nwaka (p. 50)". The rivalry between Ezeulu and Nwaka has reached its climax. The two men are in open conflict. Nwaka fiercely opposed all decisions made by Ezeulu. He categorically refuses to accept Ezeulu's political and religious authority, while inciting all the people of Umuaro to do the same. It is in view of the constant threat posed by Nwaka that Miss Ilhem Djaalab and Miss Safia Fredj maintain that "Ezeulu is increasingly under threat from rivals within his people". In other words, Ezeulu is perpetually under threat from internal rivals like Nwaka and his clique. The conflicts facing Ezeulu are enormous, both internal and external. This is why Blaise N. Machila declares that "the major conflicts in *Arrow of God* are built around Ezeulu chief Priest of Umuaro"⁶. In other words, the main conflicts in Umuaro centre around Ezeulu. In fact, Ezeulu says: "I know that Umuaro is divided and confused and I know that some people are holding secret meetings to persuade others that I am the cause of the trouble (p. 208)". Ezeulu is well aware that he is being held responsible for the division of Umuaro.

Nwaka is a key character in the understanding of the entire plot. For this reason, it is important to look back at his social situation to better understand his role in the story. The narrator introduces Nwaka in these terms: "Nwaka had carried the day. He was one of three people in all the six villages who had taken the highest title in the land, Eru, which was called after the lord of wealth himself. Nwaka came from a long line of prosperous men and from a village which itself first in Umuaro (p. 32)". In short, Nwaka is a prosperous man. He comes from a long line of wealthy men in Umuaro. The strategic social position he occupies means that his stance against Ezeulu is widely followed. What's more, Nwaka is an eloquent and rational man, who expresses himself easily to the point of turning a lie into truth in order to win the unconditional support of the people. This is what Blaise N. Machila calls "Nwaka's demagogic incitement"⁷. It's a line of reasoning similar to that of the sophists, who preach falsehoods in order to obtain the truth.

Umuaro and Okperi are two neighbouring villages. There is a latent tension between these two villages. Although they are side by side, the inhabitants of these villages do not like each other very much. Captain Winterbottom describes the relationship between Umuaro and Okperi, by saying this "The people of Okperi and their neighbours, Umuaro, are great enemies (p. 64)". This is a historical conflict between the two peoples. The inhabitants of these villages are great rivals. This is because they are simultaneously claiming a piece of land on the border between the two villages.

2-The land cause

Umuaro and Okperi are the major villages in *Arrow of God*. These two villages share a common border. The inhabitants of these villages are simultaneously claiming a piece of arable land that exists between the two villages. The inhabitants of Umuaro are more concerned about acquiring this piece of land, the legitimacy of which is disputed by the Okperi people. Umuaro is an acephalous village, meaning that it has no kings. However, in this village Ezeulu is the main priest of Ulu, chosen unanimously by the representatives of the six villages. Given the obvious absence of central political authority in Umuaro, Ezeulu, as religious leader, temporarily assumes the role of political leader. In this capacity, he urgently

⁶Blaise N. Machila, *Ambiguity in Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God*, Kunapipi, V.3, 1981, p.132

⁷*Ibidem*. p.126.

summoned the people of Umuaro to an important meeting under the palaver tree to discuss the land dispute between Umuaro and Okperi.

The subject that the people of Umuaro are being invited to debate is extremely important. It is the issue of the land dispute between Umuaro and Okperi, which Umuaro is vehemently claiming. Given the special nature of the subject under discussion, all the Umuaro elders are present at this highly important meeting to express their views on the dispute land with the people of Okperi. Speaking before the assembly, Ezeulu recounted what he knew about the problem in the following terms: "I know, he told them, my father said this to me that when our village first came here to live the land belonged to Okperi. It was Okperi who gave us a piece of their land to live in. They also gave us their deities Udo and their Ugwugwu (p. 32)". According to Ezeulu, the piece of land, Umuaro is fighting for naturally belongs to Okperi. In his view, Umuaro's land history was told to him by his father.

As a result, Ezeulu quotes his father like a history book from the moment his father's words are considered as an indisputable source of truth. If we are to believe what he says to his son Nwafo when he explicitly maintains that "A man does not speak a lie to his son [.....] Remember that always. To say My father told me is to swear the greatest oath (p. 152)". This thought echoes that of Babacar Diakhaté when he mentions that "The speech of the old man was a speech of wisdom"⁸The father's word is worthy of faith and trust, just like Ezeulu father's speech about the land history.

Ezeulu's support for Okperi at this important meeting was vigorously contested by some Umuaro residents. At the head of those who object to Ezeulu's remarks is Nwaka. He had this to say:

My father told me a different story. He told me that Okperi people were wanderers. He told me three or four different places where they sojourned for a while and moved again. They were driven away by Umuofia, then by Abame and Anita. Would they go today and claim all those sites? Would they have laid claim on our farmland in the days before the white man turned us upside down?[.....] Nwaka had totally destroyed Ezeulu's speech. The last glancing blow which killed it was the hint that the Chief Priest's mother had been a daughter of Okperi (p. 34).

Nwaka's eloquent, structured and convincing speech completely destroyed Ezeulu's version of the true identity of the owners of the disputed plot of land. Nwaka's argument contributed to emptying Ezeulu's reasoning of any truthful substance. On this basis, Nwaka succeeded in rallying the entire population of Umuaro to his cause to the point of insinuating that the land story Ezeulu recounts was probably told to him by his biological mother from Okperi. From this point onwards, it was clear that Ezeulu was establishing his maternal parents as the rightful owners of the disputed plot of land.

At the end of the discussions, the inhabitants of Umuaro came to the conclusion that the parcel of land in dispute was theirs by right. As a result, a delegation consisting of Akukalia and two of his companions was formed to travel to Okperi to ask the people of Okperi to choose between peace and war. On the way, Umuaro's emissaries discussed the issue among themselves, saying "What you should ask them, said the other companion who had spoken very little since they set out, what they should tell us is why, if the land was indeed theirs, why they let us farm it and cut thatch from it for generation after generation, until the white man came and reminded them (p. 39)". In their view, it is unacceptable, even implausible, that the people of Okperi should lay claim to this piece of farmland, where they have been farming for centuries. In their view, Okperi's claim to this parcel of farmland is false.

By focusing on the actions of the characters in the text, it is clear that the author is looking at social representation. According to Abric, "[w]e know that one of the properties of social representations is that they determine [characters'] behaviour and conduct". In other words, determining the attitudes and actions

⁸Babacar Diakhaté, Traditional Education: Methods and Finality in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1969), *Budapest International Research and Critics in Linguistics and Education (BirLE) Journal* Vol. 4, No 1, 2021, p. 2

of characters is one of the characteristics of social representations. In this sense, Carine Pianelli maintains that « [Les représentations] concourent à la construction de notre réalité»⁹. In other words, representations help to construct our real-life experience. It is in this sense that Alex Gagnon speaks of the "presentification of an absence". To put it plainly, it's about making an absence present. Like the war between Umuaro and Okperi.

II - The Manifestation and Outcome of the War in *Arrow of God*

1-The manifestation of war

Umuaro is just a few kilometers from Okperi in *Arrow of God*. These two villages share common cultures, traditions and borders. For centuries, the inhabitants of these villages have lived in peace and tranquillity. There are secular bonds of brotherhood and solidarity between these peoples. This long period of stability and tranquillity between the inhabitants of Umuaro and Okperi has been undermined by a land dispute between the two peoples. The mutual claim to the parcel of farmland on the border between the two villages ushered in a new era of turmoil, instability and even war.

The inhabitants of Umuaro reserve the exclusive right to be the rightful owners of the disputed parcel of farmland. Umuaro's emissaries are therefore in Okperi to inform the village dignitaries of Umuaro's position on the matter, leaving it up to them to accept in order to perpetuate peace and stability, or to contest and go to war against Umuaro. Despite the seriousness and extreme importance of the urgent message from Umuaro delegation to Okperi authorities, the latter seemed to ignore, neglect or even trivialize the message from Umuaro emissaries. Frustrated and outraged by the irreverent attitude of Okperi wise men towards them, Akukalia, in a desperate act, destroys the ikenga god of Ebo. The narrator describes what happened next as follows:

So it was true. Still Ebo turned round and went into his obi. At his shrine he knelt down to have a close look. Yes, the gap where his *ikenga*, the strength of his right arm, had stood stared back at him- an empty patch, without dust, on the wooden board. Nnadoh! Nnadoh! he wept, calling his dead father to come to his aid. Then he got up and went into his sleeping-room. He was there a little while before Otikpo, thinking he might be doing violence to himself, rush into the room to see. But it was late. Ebo pushed him aside and came into the obi with his loaded gun. At the threshold he knelt down and aimed. Akukalia, seeing the danger, dashed forward. Although the bullet had caught him in the chest he continued running with his machet held high until he fell at the threshold, his face hitting the low thatch before he went down. When the body was brought to Umuaro everyone was stunned. It had never happened before that an emissary of Umuaro killed abroad (p. 46).

The head of the Umuaro delegation is murdered in Okperi while on a mission there on behalf of his peers. The lifeless body of Akukalia was transported to Umuaro. A worthy son of Umuaro had just lost his life in Okperi while carrying out a major mission entrusted to him by the dignitaries of Umuaro. This heinous crime plunged Umuaro into turmoil. The people of Umuaro refuse to condone the death of one of their sons. So they devise a Machiavellian plan to spill the blood of Okperi's sons in return for Akukalia's accidental murder.

Umuaro and Okperi are in open conflict. They are now officially at war. Each side is seeking to inflict more loss of life on its enemy. It's time for revenge and settling scores. The two villages stare into each other's eyes, watching out for the slightest misstep by their enemy to inflict a mortal blow. The war has reached its climax, with deaths on both sides. The narrator relates the following facts:

The war was waged from one Afo to the next. On the day it began Umuaro killed two men of Okperi. The next day was Nkwo, and there was no fighting. On the two following days, Eke and Oye, the fighting

⁹Ibidem. p. 24.

grew fierce. Umuaro killed four men and Okperi replied with three, one of the three being Akukalia's brother, Okoye. The next day, Afo, saw the war brought to a sudden close(p. 51).

War raged in Umuaro and Okperi, with its trail of deaths. Umuaro responded to Akukalia's death by sowing sadness and desolation in Okperi through the massacre of several Okperi nationals. During this tribal and fratricidal war between Umuaro and Okperi, Umuaro suffered three fatalities, while Okperi reluctantly suffered seven. The war rages between the two villages, systematically decimating the village populations. On the subject of the violence undermining the two sister villages, Alican Erbakan states that "Although clan wars often broke out, violence still remains the last option as diplomacy takes the first in emergent crises"¹⁰. The same applies to the conflict between Umuaro and Okperi, where unprecedented violence remains the only means of recourse.

The representation of what Chinua Achebe calls "tribal wars"¹¹ or "[The] inter-tribal conflict"¹² in *Arrow of God* participates in the reconstruction of a pre-colonial African social fact. In so doing, he places his work within the logic of what Dan Izevbaye describes as the "realistic fiction"¹³. Insofar as, in his texts, he represents the real life experience of the Igbo. This is why Dan Izevbaye reaffirms that: "texts are representations of the reality"¹⁴. In other words, reality is the raw material of fictional texts. Moreover, the thematization of the land war as a real African social fact clearly indicates that the author provides "the concrete reference to his fiction"¹⁵. In other words, the story of the work is inspired by an authentic true story. Having said that, it's important now to turn our attention to resolving the crisis.

2-The end of the war

The war continues to wreak havoc between the people of Umuaro and Okperi in *Arrow of God*. For the time being, the focus is not on reconciliation but rather on perfecting battle strategies to cause more casualties on the opposing side. For a long time, war was the only topic of conversation between the people of Umuaro and Okperi. The war caused harm on both sides. It has left indelible marks in the midst of the belligerent villages. Villages that were once united, supportive and close-knit are now divided for eternity because of a bloody fratricidal war. The populations of the villages involved in the war are exhausted by the macabre death toll, which is increasing day by day. What's more, by constantly expending so much energy and effort, they end up exhausting each other. Consequently, they are unanimously inclined to seek peace and social stability for the well-being of their various peoples.

Unlike Umuaro, Okperi maintained good relations with the colonial administration, headed by Captain Winterbottom. Captain Winterbottom was categorically opposed to Umurao's war against Okperi. He has absolutely no desire to see this savage war continue to bring unnecessary grief to families. To this end, the narrator relates this: "It is all due to the white man who says, like an elder to two fighting children: you will not fight while I am around (p. 39)". In other words, the settler orders the two rival forces to cease hostilities immediately in his presence. In essence, the settler's presence acts as an interposing force to prevent the rival villages from clashing.

The arrival of Captain Witterbottom in Umuaro-Okperi conflict officially marks the end of hostilities between the two villages. On this subject, the narrator says "The white man, Wintabota, brought soldiers to Umuaro and stopped it. The story of what these soldiers did in Abame was told with fear, and so

¹⁰ Alican Erbakan, *Colonising the Mind in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God, and No Longer at Ease*, Mémoire de Master, Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences, 2017, p. 26

¹¹ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, London, Heinemann, 1958, p. 48

¹² Owen G. Morduant, *Conflict and its Manifestations in Achebe's Arrow of God*, Afrika Focus, Vol. 5, Nr. 3-4, 1989, p. 154

¹³ Dan Izevbaye, *Arrow of God and the Re-Reading of Event, Image and Text*, An African Journal of new Writing, N°52, 2014, p. 6

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

¹⁵ F. Abiola Irele, *The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart*, African Studies Quarterly, Vol. 4, 2000, p. 3

Umuaro made no effort to resist but laid down their arms (p. 51)". Although the inhabitants of Umuaro were not completely satisfied with the human and material damage they had inflicted on Okperi, Captain Winterbottom imposed an immediate ceasefire on Umuaro. In view of the firepower of Captain Winterbottom's army, Umuaro agreed to lay down its arms. Umuaro inhabitants' weapons have played a major role in sowing terror in Okperi. Speaking of these weapons, the narrator says that "The white man, not satisfied that he had stopped the war, had gathered all the guns in Umuaro and asked the soldiers to break them in the face of all, except three or four which he carried away (p. 52)". The destruction of the weapons of war marked the definitive end of Umuaro-Okperi war, ushering in a new era of peace and stability.

The peace restored thanks to the intervention of the colonizer opened up new prospects for the future of the two villages. The experience of war certainly helped them to understand the need to fight to preserve the bonds of solidarity and conviviality rather than stirring up hatred and discord, the seeds of division, conflict and war. The traditional order was replaced by the new modern order with the arrival of the colonizer. And this arrival contributed greatly to putting an end to the savage and bloody war between two neighbouring villages. It is in the light of Winterbottom's salvific action that Mpalive-Hangson writes that "Achebe describes Winterbottom as an agent of the powers of event"¹⁶. In other words, Winterbottom is seen as a peacemaker in the resolution of this conflict. What should we remember?

Conclusion

To sum up, we can say that the analysis of the representation of the land war in the novel has enabled us to look into the underlying causes that led to the war and then to the process of overcoming the crisis. Internal social rivalries and the conflict over land are essentially the major causes of the war. This bitterly fought war between the two antagonistic villages resulted in the massive destruction of many lives on both sides. The intervention of the colonizer greatly contributed to the pacification of relations between the two previously warring peoples. The return to order, peace and social stability was made possible thanks to efforts made by the colonizer to achieve this end.

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