

## **AJIJA AS IGBO COSMO-ONTOLOGICAL AGENT OF DESTRUCTION IN ACHEBE'S ARROW OF GOD**

BY

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### **Abstract**

*Arrow of God*, a complex-structure text has enjoyed a lot of critical attention, but several events in it as constructed by Achebe are still seen in new lights. As many critics have studied the work from the view points of African history, cultural conflict, conflict between tradition and modernity, arrogation of excessive power and individual extremism among others. questions have not specifically been asked about what *really* 'beats the drum to which Ezeulu dances' (132), especially seeking to know what makes the chief character behave/act the way he shouldn't have acted. Attempts may have been made to answer this question in some ways, however, this paper sets out to address this vital question through the instrumentality of *Ajija* which Opata says, 'is a force which makes an individual do all the wrong things in a situation where ordinarily the individual would have done all the right things' (10). It works by 'carrying away' a person's mind and by beclouding one's reasoning. The stupefaction that *Ajija* causes is said to range from making one to commit one dishonourable act or another, leading to minor misfortunes and to death. The aim, therefore, is to argue that Ezeulu's actions and decisions were not ordinarily or self-inspired. A force was behind it, not that of the ultimate power as the leader and Chief Priest of Ulu but something beyond his control. The end of events in the novel truly reveal that Ezeulu and other characters like Akukalia, Obika and even Umuaro as a community are afflicted with the destructive influence of *Ajija*. This, validates Opata's suspicion that the Igbo nation might be under the same spell owing to the way we have hastily abandoned our cultural values and traditional practices.

**Keywords:** Ajija force, Igbo Cosmology, Irreversibility, Destructiveness/ Death, Achebe, Opata

### **Introduction**

For a novel like Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964) that has attracted quite a lot of critical attention from scholars world all-over, it may seem difficult to have something new to say about the novel which has not been said. But being in the class of 'great art' (Northrop Frye, 19), a masterpiece and the most complex textual creation of Achebe, there are always new things that could be seen and from different new lights depending on the search-instrument employed. In this paper, *Ajija* – a very powerful Igbo mystical cum mythical force that, 'occupies a person's mind and makes such a person to think and behave in very untoward ways' (Opata, 9) is deployed as a conceptual tool for reading this important novel. In scholarly explorations, many critics have paid more attention to the two major fall-outs of Ezeulu with

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the Umuaro people – first, his bearing witness against his own people in the Okperi/Umuaro land dispute; second, by sending his son Oduche to the white man's religion. To this, Akuebue reports that, Umuaro is *saying* they are being betrayed for the second time by Ezeulu. Another very major area of focus by critics apart from the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves and the New Yam Feast, is the character, the personality, the mythic figure of Ezeulu as half-spirit and half-human. Critics such as A. N. Akwanya, O. A. Ejisu, Marcel Ikehukwu Onyibor, J. Aning and J. Nsiah, M. AmadiheEzugu and host of others have in recent times focused their studies on the image of Ezeulu and his conflicts with the Umuaro people; with his diety, Ulu and with himself including their varying intersecting outcomes.

In line with the numerous other studies that has been done on the text, this paper focuses on the influence of the *Ajija* force on some of the key characters in the novel especially the character of Ezeulu in order to see how *this* culminates to the general cosmological orientation of the Igbo people using Umuaro as a point for this critical judgment. In what many see as Ezeulu's misdemeanor, this paper holds that there is a force behind his actions. If not, how could he be the **only** one to testify against his own community where he assumes both the position of a political and religious leader. Worse of all is, at this time he did not testify as the mouthpiece of Ulu because it is Umuaro that is Ulu and they already hold contrary position. So, there is already, a signal that there is something wrong somewhere. In the case of sending Oduche among the Christians to be his 'eye and ear among those people,' (220) without considering it an act of desecration, helps us to glaringly see the full-blown manifestation of a very strong *unusual* force which is conceptualized here as *Ajija* and not 'madness' as Nwaka alleged. The climax of this manipulative force starkly stands before us at the point where Ezeulu obstinately, deliberately refuses to eat the remaining three sacred yams as demanded by the times and the people of Umuaro as a matter of urgency. It is then we come to the full conclusion that this can only be the agentive, destructive force of *Ajija* 'which makes an individual do all the wrong things in a situation where ordinarily the individual would have done all the right things' (10), thereby leading to death and self-destruction.

Apart from this major case with Ezeulu which will be discussed in detail using the concept of *Ajija*, other characters that come under the same manipulative force are: Obika, Nwaka, Egodo, Oduche and even Umuaro as a community. The diverse ways in which these characters manifest the beclouding influence of *Ajija* will also be discussed. However, at the moment, let's consider what this *Ajija* phenomenon *really* means according to Damian U. Opata.

### On the Conceptual Border of *Ajija*

Here, there is a clear distinction between *Ajija* and *Agwu*. While acknowledging I. N. C. Nwosu, Opata explains that *Agwu* is the female counterpart of the male side of God, (26) and that 'human beings have the means of controlling the excesses of *Agwu*,... but have no type of power over *Ajija*' (29). So considering the unusual far-reaching influence of *Ajija* over its victim, Opata writes:

*Ajija* works by bewitching a person, by beclouding one's reasoning, by temporarily "carrying away" a person's mind or causing a momentary disorientation in the way a person thinks and behaves. It is a force that occupies a person's mind and makes such a

person to think and behave in very untoward ways. The way of recognizing it is only after it has completed its action. (9)

He further adds:

It could be said that *Ajija* is that force which makes an individual do all the wrong things in a situation where ordinarily the individual would have done all the right things. This is what makes *Ajija* one of the most dreaded phenomena among many Igbo communities.... There are no known offences which one would commit and the person would be said to have offended *Ajija*.... There is no warning that it is coming one's way.... It is just a force which possesses one, and one can never know that he or she is so possessed until *Ajija* has left the person. (10)

He summarizes by saying that 'there are several acts of behaviour which could attract the visitation of *Ajija*. Such acts include willful neglect of the ancestors, vain gloriousness, stubbornness, etc., although these are at the same time seen as manifestation of *Ajija*' (10).

For the sake of clarification, the attention being paid to this cosmo-ontological agentive force *Ajija* is as a result of the depth-meaning it bears among the people of Edda in Afikpo South Local Government of Ebonyi State – an integral community of the Igbo tribe. For the people, the force of *Ajija* is a very serious, terrible [and pathetic] reality. When an individual is under the spell of *Ajija*, such literally does everything wrong that would have done right, still without realizing such has been done wrong. This is the strangest thing about *Ajija* such that among the Edda people, it is not some kind of myth that can be explained in one way or the other. It is more than a myth because that *force* itself that causes one to behave/act in the manner described above has no explanation - it is mysteriously inexplicable and insoluble. And as Opatá presents it, the phenomenon is rather highly metaphysical.

This is why this paper finds Opatá's articulations on *Ajija* very appropriate and relevant to this study especially where he notes that, *Ajija* works by beclouding one's reasoning and by "carrying away" one's mind, thereby making a person do the wrong things which would have been done right. The condition of 'finality and irreversibility' with which *Ajija* comes, imposing 'the image of stupidity' on its victim makes the individual behave like a fool. Thus, 'Ajija could be said to be a deity that leads human beings to foolery' (12). As for being a deity, I don't know about that but as a manipulative force, I completely concur.

The idea that the spell of *Ajija* also stupefies a person and deprives the individual the ability to use his or her rational faculty, or the capacity to understand, is true to *Ajija* which the worse of it is, 'it deludes the person into believing that he or she reasons and acts rationally' (13). The other functional aspectual manifestations of *Ajija* as variously explained by Opatá, can be paraphrased and summarized thus: as a whip in the hands of God. Since nothing escapes the wrath of God, *Ajija* therefore becomes some kind of Fate in action (18); *Ajija* as could be inflicted on one by one's *Chi*, this is where the phenomenon of *Ajija* is most difficult to decipher among the Igbo; the capacity of *Ajija* to make people act like they are insane (23); *Ajija* also working like the Christian Devil that serves as an agent for leading people astray even when they have not committed any offence against it; It is also believed that any family afflicted with *Ajija* is bound for doom and destruction (30). This is one of the reasons the Igbo dread *Ajija* for it is best understood as some type of exterminator.

Other variant fundamental understandings of *Ajija* are: as death itself. It is the precursor of death and there is no antidote against it. As a complex phenomenon in whatever form it manifests itself, it always works to ruin people. To align this idea into how it best suits this study, it is said that those usually afflicted by *Ajija* are those who have committed one offence or the other, those who are vainglorious and extremely over-ambitious, those who tend to assume that they could get all things done without supernatural intervention... those who think they "know too much" (34). This dimension relates to the character Ezeulu. On the final note for this force of *Ajija* as Igbo cosmological agent of destruction, Opata plainly submits that, 'the stupefaction *Ajija* causes does not end until the person has committed one dishonourable or shameful act which takes a toll on the person. Unfortunately, *Ajija* does not stop functioning until it has achieved all its objectives which usually range from small misfortune to death. With all these said I am very certain that we can see the circumstance and force that surround the life and end of Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*. Yet in advancing investigation on the influential powers of *Ajija*, Opata raises the question of how the Igbos hastily abandon their Igbo traditional religion, language as well as their political/leadership inactiveness/backwardness. He questions if this is not also as a result of the manipulative influence of *Ajija*. This question and the other various ways *Ajija* manifest will be appropriated to the novel to see how they occur and how *Ajija* exacts its influence on its victims and their eventual end.

### ***Ajija* as a Cosmo-ontological Agent of Destruction**

As a phenomenon that is very real in the cosmological world view and collective existence of the Igbo people, engrained and expressed in their beliefs, it is important to consider the character and actions of Ezeulu in line with the dominating influence of *Ajija* bearing in mind two thoughts presented by Opata about *Ajija* – i.e. about having the capacity to delude an individual into believing that he/she reasons and acts rationally; as well as the possibility of *Ajija* being inflicted on an individual by one's own *Chi*. This second part becomes possible when a man says 'yes' and his *Chi* says the contrary.

In the character of Ezeulu three incidents enable us to see that there is a force behind his actions different from the physical display of that force which many scholars have described as power drunkenness, pride, arrogance, vindictiveness etc. In this, Nwaka is the first to arouse attention to such disposition when he says: 'I have been watching this Ezeulu for many years. He is a man of ambition; he wants to be king, priest, diviner, all' (27). But that is not the point rather as Ezeulu himself would say to his good friend, Akuebue: 'you cannot know the Thing which beats the drum to which Ezeulu dances' (132). In other words, there is something that beats the drum for him which no one neither sees nor knows, not even himself, a force, of course beyond him. Pay attention to Achebe's use of the phrase – 'the Thing.' That is why, while he rummages in his thought, he challenges the use of the word *dare* to confront his position and powers. There he says: 'take away that word *dare*,.... Yes I say take it away. No man in all Umuaro can stand up and say that I dare not' (3). For a man to think in this manner in his heart, there is indeed something that beats the drum for him which 'beclouds his reasoning' and that is considered be the force of *Ajija*.

In the first incident, the land dispute between Okperi and Umuaro people, Ezeulu testifies against his own people, but Nwaka and the entire Umuaro are against his position

seeing it as a great betrayal; yet Ezeulu does not see anything wrong with what he did – where a whole community agree on a particular thing and he is the only person with a different information. Then, the question that nudges our mind is: what gives Ezeulu the confidence, the conviction that his testimony is the truth contrary to that of entire Umuaro. Thoughts based on the ways of the Igbo people that, 'no man however great was greater than his people; that no one ever won judgment against his clan,' how could Ezeulu continue to maintain his ground based on this saying if not that *something* works against his rationality? Of course it is this *something* or *force* that even Captain Winterbottom describes as, '**some pretty fierce tabu** working on him' (38). So even the white man is skeptical of Ezeulu's rationality in this regard; and what do we see playing out here? The obvious manipulative force of *Ajija* because, often someone being afflicted with this spell, does not always see anything wrong with what he does but the people around him do. The 'fierce tabu' that Winterbottom suspects here is absolutely considered to be the destructive force of *Ajija* which has beclouded his mind against his own people.

Akukalia's action is another incident that sustains the argument projected in this study where *Ajjais* manifested again in the form of fierce anger. Just as Opata hinted that when it takes over an individual and he/she uncontrollably does what he/she shouldn't have done, the blame is always attributed to the 'Christian Devil' (Ekwensu) thereby painting the force of *Ajija* like the 'Christian Devil.' As the emissary of Umuaro on a mission to deliver Umuaro's message of war or peace, with his companions, Akukalia allows his quick temper to overtake him in spite of the warnings of Ogbuefi Egonwanne. This show of excessive anger is a manifestation of the force of *Ajija* because Ogbuefi Egonwanne has already cautioned him on his actions. Splitting Ebo's *silikengainto* two leads to his own death, the sabotage of the mission and the general outbreak of war between Okperi and Umuaro people; and just as it is said, the stupefaction *Ajija* causes does not stop and ranges from committing one dishonourable act or another which leads to small misfortunes and to death. At the return of Akukalia's body, his clansmen acknowledge that he 'had done an unforgivable thing' (25). And as if to indeed validate Opata's articulation on the ways *Ajija* also manifests as the 'Christian Devil,' the narrator concludes that, 'the death of Akukalia and his brother in one and the same dispute showed that Ekwensu's (Christian Devil's) hand was in it' (28). And this is truly how the *Ajija* syndrome works.

As if the entire Umuaro is being afflicted by the force of *Ajija*, they lose the land case to Okperi people. But when this matter is deeply considered, one realizes that they did not lose the case indeed as a result of Ezeulu's testimony but because the Okperi people have been more friendly to the forces of colonialism; they had warmly received the colonialists unlike their headstrong Umuaroneighbour. So the colonialists see this as an opportunity to return the favour or friendliness shown them by the Okperi people thereby disfavours Umuaro. When this matter is closely examined we rather find traces of *Ajija* being responsible for Umuaro's backwardness having resisted colonial presence for five years as a result of their stubbornness. This is really what accounts for their loss of the land case including the non-payment of their age grades when used as labourers in the road construction in which 'Olu and Igbo' (86) communities' age grade received wages for their labour. As Opata rightly suspects, it seems there is a force against the Igbo nation as in the case of the Umuaro people. So as we noted earlier, elements of *Ajija* proliferate the entire community.

The second event concerns Ezeulu sending his son Oduche to the white man's religion. This comes as a shock to the entire Umuaro people and displeasing even to his immediate household. The entire Umuaro is talking yet Ezeulu does not see anything wrong with what he has done. At this point, the force of *Ajija* seems to have completely engulfed him and his sense of rationality. Of course, that's why he retorts to his friend Akukalia, 'who tells the clan what it says? What does the clan know?' (131). So because of *Ajija*'s power of delusion, Ezeulu sees himself as all-knowing, for here he says: 'I am Known and at the same time I am Unknowable' (132). Even as Ezeulu claims half-spirit, half-human, whenever a man begins to speak like this, we know that surely there is something wrong with him. Ezeulu completely jettisons his friend's all-important advice when Akukalia cautions him thus: 'Umuaro will always say that you betrayed them before the white man. And they will say that you are betraying them again today by sending your son to join in desecrating the land' (131). This is where we feel the full influence of *Ajija* on Ezeulu just as Opata talks about "carrying away" a man's mind.

Despite the way Achebe presents Ezeulu's appointment for a Warrant Chief and his rejection of same, we can identify gross ignorance and sheer stupidity in between the transaction of knowledge/intelligence in what is really involved. First, what is really involved is not clearly explained to Ezeulu by the errant messengers, if it was, he would have perhaps reacted differently. In the midst of this *lack of adequate knowledge*, the force of *Ajija* takes hold on him by making him turn down the well-meaning invitation and offer of Winterbottom. Oduche who is supposed to supply the correct intelligence having been sent to be Ezeulu's 'eyes and ears,' in the white man's learning/ways is not consulted to provide the explanation Ezeulu needs. We remember where Ezeulu so encouraged Oduche to learn the white man's knowledge to the point he can write with his left hand. So as we already know the kind of man Ezeulu is – an ambitious Chief Priest. It would have been difficult for him to turn down the offer if he has access to the proper information. The arrogance of Ezeulu that, 'Ezeulu will not be anybody's chief except Ulu,' (175) now has a mix of ignorance and the typical beclouding force of *Ajija*. At this point, even Mr. Clarke is greatly astonished at Ezeulu's rejection of such juicy, elevated appointment, something he thought Ezeulu would happily accept/embrace.

To further the arguments in this paper, reference will be made to other relevant areas/incidents where the force of *Ajija* features prominently implicating their internal interconnectedness. One of such is the internal conflict between Ezeulu and Ulu, where Ezeulu wilfully in arrogance makes himself 'the whip with which Ulu flogs Umuaro' (209) thereby coming in-between Ulu and the people. And as Ulu warned, Ezeulu received blows not meant for him. Therefore following the outcome of this internal scuffle between Ulu and his priest, it is logical to agree with V. U. Ola's metacritical interpolations where she avers that:

Without consuming the three tubers of yam, the harvest festival which is also Ulu's most prized ceremony and the period of his highest glory and appreciation by the community, cannot take place. The destiny of the community, the harvesting of their crops and the appreciation of the deity for its care and protection over his people are all tragically interwoven. Unknown to the chief priest, therefore, he was punishing Ulu through the people of Umuaro. He was in his search for revenge, stepping on the toes of his god who in his less than divine aspect enjoyed the annual tribute of a grateful people. (Ola qtd in Onyibor, 115)

This is one of the greatest inadvertent undoing of Ezeulu, to have in the process of punishing Umuaro people, not only punished his own family but stepped on Ulu's toes and punished it as well by denying it the worship and thanksgiving of the people as well as the respects from the other small gods who are usually offered the opportunity to celebrate during the New Yam Festival. So Ezeulu receives the death blow he got neither because he seeks revenge on the people nor that Ulu has taken sides with the people but ultimately because, Ulu itself feels disrespected and offended for the delay and denial of its entitlements in this season. So it is only the force of *Ajija* that could make a Chief Priest insensitive to this kind of sensitive and urgent matter after the instructions of the ten elders. This is why Nwaka rightly interjects that, 'a priest like Ezeulu leads a god to ruin himself' (213).

In the case of Obika's death, it may not be completely correct to attribute it wholly to the wrath of Ulu although, 'something told Metafi that someone was going to pay a big price' (212) which foreshadows Obika's death. Obika's death happens to be one of the complex, controversial incidents that Achebe re-enacts in the text, owing basically to two or three possible circumstances that could have led to his death. The first is Obika's attack on Otakekpele – a man 'known throughout Umuaro as a wicked medicine-man' (196). It is said that, 'with the flash of lightning Obika had dropped his matchet, rushed forward and in one movement lifted Otakekpele off the ground and thrown him into the near-by bush in a shower of sand' (198). With such erratic action, the possible question that will prod the minds of the crowd is: *why did he do it?* It is to this that Ezeulu himself dazed with amazement retorts: 'the rash, foolish Obika' (198). Obika's action here cannot be described as anything less than obvious manifestation of full-blown force of *Ajija* because as Ezeulu asked: 'did not all the other young men see Otakekpele and look away? But his son could never look away' (198). For an action that even Ezeulu blames his son, do we think that Otakekpele is going to allow Obika go scot-free without revenge, being a notorious wicked medicine-man in Umuaro? So attributing Obika's death only to Ulu's means to punish his priest and his family for his stubbornness and disobedience, does not stand on a solid ground where Obika already has enough sin in his own hands.

The second circumstance is going to run the Ogbazuluobodo – night spirit, with a slight fever. Obika with understanding of his health status thus explains: 'but this is not something a man can do when his body is not all his. Since yesterday I have been having a little fever' (223 – 224). Even when Obika consents to run, he says: 'I am agreeing in cowardice' (224). Then, Okuata's thoughtful question, 'going out with this fever?' raises more concern. Meaning simply, that this man is incapacitated as he is indisposed to undergo the transfiguration into spirit which Ogbazuluobodo entails. Such transition will require a healthy man even for its physical requirement to run at a high speed. Because it is also said that, 'light and ogbazuluobodo were mortal enemies' (224), who knows at his return when he cries: *EwoOkuo!* if he had encountered light. Circumstances leading to Obika's death are quite complex that they can't be attributed to Ulu's wrath alone. After all, Obika knowing his health condition yet accepts to go run the ogbazuluobodo may not completely be removed with the influence of the force of *Ajija*. That's on the third note.

## Conclusion

In general, the haste with which Umuaro people abandoned Ulu for the Christian Religion/God is also of some concern as if they didn't see what the Abame people did to their *Ogba* when it begins to work against the people. Instead of doing same to Ulu and set up another god, they rather completely abandon their traditional practices to join the worship of a foreign god as if they are under the fierce influence of *Ajija*. This attitude gives relevance to Opata's indictment as to how the Igbos generally abandon their traditional practices, language, cultural values, etc., as it may be also as a result of being afflicted with the force of *Ajija*. Hence he closes thus: 'there are signs enough to suggest that *Ajija* hovers on the fringes of Igbo ways of being in the world. We still have time enough to ward it off' (53). This paper is in agreement with this assertion owing to the end of everything in the novel. Of particular interest and as found in the text, is the obvious manipulative power of *Ajija* on Ezeulu, the lead character, to the point where he foolhardily sends his son to join the new religion regardless of the peoples' sayings; to the point of ignorantly rejecting the white man's juicy offer of a Warrant Chief as a result of lack of adequate intelligence; to the point of insistently refusing to eat the three remaining sacred yams thereby offending Ulu as well as the people, hence give credit to Winterbottom's suspicion that Ezeulu could be under some 'fierce tabu'; and unknown to Ezeulu, this is the thing that 'beats the drum to which he dances.' That, is the mystical power of *Ajija*. This same agentive force, in its manner of 'carrying away' a person's mind and stupefying a person, lands Ezeulu into self-destruction; as well as others like Obika, Akukalia in the novel.

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