7.4 *Arrow of God*

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Preparing to Read

There are artists in every culture, and one of their functions is to help the rest of us see what we cannot see with our own limited vision. Like the Zen archer in the last

reading, Edogo, the carver of ritual masks, is part of something much larger than himself. In this novel, the ways of the West have begun to infiltrate a Nigerian village and Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu, struggles against them.

In this selection we see his son, Edogo, performing the role of artist as he carves the ritual mask that will enable a new ancestral spirit to speak to the people. He is not carving a god, he assures his father; he is carving a mask. We see him enter his ritual space, the sacred spirit-house that faces the forest. Like the Zen archer, he must empty himself and allow the art to emerge.

Notice the similarity with the last reading. It is not the individual who does what he does. The individual is a conduit, a channel, through which greater forces flow. Edogo sees himself and is seen by his village as a religious figure as well as an artist. Like a priest, he presides over mysteries, and through his person he helps them become available to others.

MR. GOODCOUNTRY told the converts of Umuaro about the early Christians of the Niger Delta who fought the bad customs of their people, destroyed shrines and killed the sacred iguana. He told them of Joshua Hart, his kinsman, who suffered martyrdom in Bonny.

"If we are Christians, we must be ready to die for the faith," he said. "You must be ready to kill the python as the people of the rivers killed the iguana. You address the python as Father. It is nothing but a snake, the snake that deceived our first mother, Eve. If you are afraid to kill it do not count yourself a Christian."

The first Umuaro man to kill and eat a python was Josiah Madu of Umuagu. But the story did not spread outside the little group of Christians, most of whom refused, however, to follow Josiah's example. They were led by Moses Unachukwu, the first and the most famous convert in Umuaro.

Unachukwu was a carpenter, the only one in all those parts. He had learnt the trade under the white missionaries who built the Onitsha Industrial Mission. In his youth he had been conscripted to carry the loads of the soldiers who were sent to destroy Abame as a reprisal for the killing of a white man. What Unachukwu saw during that punitive expedition taught him that the white man was not a thing of fun. And so after his release he did not return to Umuaro but made his way to Onitsha, where he became house-boy to the carpenter-missionary, J. P. Hargreaves. After over ten years' sojourn in a strange land, Unachukwu returned to Umuaro with the group of missionaries who succeeded after two previous failures in planting the new faith among his people. Unachukwu regarded the success of this third missionary effort as due largely to himself. He saw his sojourn in Onitsha as a parallel to that of the Moses of the Old Testament in Egypt.

As the only carpenter in the neighbourhood Moses Unachukwu built almost single-handed the new church in Umuaro. Now he was not only a lay reader but a pastor's warden. As Umuaro did not have a pastor as yet, only a catechist, the title was honorific. But it showed the great esteem in which Moses Unachukwu was held in the young church. The last catechist, Mr. Molokwu, consulted him in whatever he did. Mr. Goodcountry, on the other hand, attempted from the very first to ignore him. But Moses was not a man to be ignored lightly.

Mr. Goodcountry's teaching about the sacred python gave Moses the first opportunity to challenge him openly. To do this he used not only

the Bible but, strangely enough for a convert, the myths of Umuaro. He spoke with great power for, coming as he did from the village which carried the priesthood of Idemili, he knew perhaps more than others what the python was. On the other side, his great knowledge of the Bible and his sojourn in Onitsha which was the source of the new religion gave him great confidence. He told the new teacher quite bluntly that neither the Bible nor the catechism asked converts to kill the python, a beast full of ill omen.

"Was it for nothing that God put a curse on its head?" he asked, and then turned abruptly into the traditions of Umuaro. "Today there are six villages in Umuaro; but this has not always been the case. Our fathers tell us that there were seven before, and the seventh was called Umuama." Some of the converts nodded their support. Mr. Goodcountry listened patiently and contemptuously.

"One day six brothers of Umuama killed the python and asked one of their number, Iweka, to cook yam pottage with it. Each of them brought a piece of yam and a bowl of water to Iweka. When he finished cooking the yam pottage the men came one by one and took their pieces of yam. Then they began to fill their bowls to the mark with the yam stew. But this time only four of them took their measure before the stew got finished."

Moses Unachukwu's listeners smiled, except Mr. Goodcountry who sat like a rock. Oduche smiled because he had heard the story as a little boy and forgotten it until now.

"The brothers began to quarrel violently, and then to fight. Very soon the fighting spread throughout Umuama, and so fierce was it that the village was almost wiped out. The few people that survived fled from their village, across the great river to the land of Olu where they are scattered today. The remaining six villages seeing what had happened to Umuama went to a seer to know the reason, and he told them that the royal python was sacred to Idemili; it was this deity which had punished Umuama. From that day the six villages decreed that henceforth the python was not to be killed in Umuaro, and that anyone who killed it would be regarded as having killed his kinsman." Moses ended by counting on his fingers the villages and clans which also forbade the killing of the python. Then Mr. Goodcountry spoke.

"The story such as you have just told us is not fit to be heard in the house of God. But I allowed you to go on so that all may see the foolishness of it." There was murmuring from the congregation which might have stood either for agreement or disagreement.

"I shall leave it to your own people to answer you." Mr. Goodcountry looked round the small congregation, but no one spoke. "Is there no one here who can speak up for the Lord?"

Oduche who had thus far inclined towards Unachukwu's position had a sudden stab of insight. He raised his hand and was about to put it down again. But Mr. Goodcountry had seen him.

"Yes?"

"It is not true that the Bible does not ask us to kill the serpent. Did not God tell Adam to crush the serpent which deceived his wife?" Many people clapped for him.

"Do you hear that, Moses?"

Moses stood up to answer, but Mr. Goodcountry was not going to give him another opportunity.

"You say you are the first Christian in Umuaro, you partake of the Holy Meal; and yet whenever you open your mouth nothing but heathen filth pours out. Today a child who sucks at his mother's breast has taught you the Scriptures. Is it not as Our Lord himself said that the first shall become last and the last become first. The world will pass away but not one single word of Our Lord will be set aside." He turned to Oduche. "When the time comes for your baptism you will be called Peter; on this rock will I build my Church."

This caused more clapping from a part of the congregation. Moses immediately rose to his feet.

"Do I look to you like someone you can put in your bag and walk away?" he asked. "I have

been to the fountainhead of this new religion and seen with my own eyes the white people who brought it. So I want to tell you now that I will not be led astray by outsiders who choose to weep louder than the owners of the corpse. You are not the first teacher I have seen; you are not the second; you are not the third. If you are wise you will face the work they sent you to do here and take your hand off the python. You can say that I told you so. Nobody here has complained to you that the python has ever blocked his way as he came to church. If you want to do your work here you will heed what I have said, but if you want to be the lizard that ruined his own mother's funeral you may carry on as you are doing." He turned to Oduche. "You may be called Peter, or you may be called Paul or Barnabas; it does not pull a hair from me. And I have nothing to say to a mere boy who should be picking palm nuts for his mother. But since you have also become our teacher I shall be waiting for the day when you will have the courage to kill a python in this Umuaro. A coward may cover the ground with his words but when the time comes to fight he runs away."

At that moment Oduche took his decision. There were two pythons—a big one and a small one—which lived almost entirely in his mother's hut, on top of the wall which carried the roof. They did no harm and kept the rats away; only once were they suspected of frightening away a hen and swallowing her eggs. Oduche decided that he would hit one of them on the head with a big stick. He would do it so carefully and secretly that when it finally died people would think it had died of its own accord.

Six days passed before Oduche found a favourable moment, and during this time his heart lost some of its strength. He decided to take the smaller python. He pushed it down from the wall with his stick but could not bring himself to smash its head. Then he thought he heard people coming and had to act quickly. With lightning speed he picked it up as he had seen their neighbour, Anosi, do many times, and carried it into his sleeping-room. A new and exciting thought came to him then. He opened the box which Moses had built for him, took out his singlet and towel and locked the python inside. He felt a great relief within. The python would die for lack of air, and he would be responsible for its death without being guilty of killing it. In the ambivalence of his present life his act seemed to him a very happy compromise.

Ezeulu's first son, Edogo, had left home early that day to finish the mask he was carving for a new ancestral spirit. It was now only five days to the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves when this spirit was expected to return from the depths of the earth and appear to men as a Mask. Those who would act as his attendants were making great plans for his coming; they had learnt their dance and were now anxious about the mask Edogo was carving for them. There were other carvers in Umuaro besides him; some of them were even better. But Edogo had a reputation for finishing his work on time unlike Obiako, the master carver, who only took up his tools when he saw his customers coming. If it had been any other kind of carving Edogo would have finished it long ago, working at it any moment his hands were free. But a mask was different; he could not do it in the home under the profane gaze of women and children but had to return to the spirit-house built for such work at a secluded corner of the Nkwo market place. No one who had not been initiated into the secret of Masks would dare to approach the hut which faced the forest, away from the market place. At certain times when women were called upon to rub its red-earth exterior and decorate it with white, green, yellow and black patterns men were always there guarding the entrance.

The hut was dark inside although the eye got used to it after a short while. Edogo put down the white *okwe* wood on which he was going to work and then unslung his goatskin bag in which he carried his tools. Apart from the need for secrecy, Edogo had always found the atmosphere of this hut right for carving masks. All around him were older masks and other regalia of ancestral spirits, some of them older than

even his father. They produced a certain ambience which gave power and cunning to his fingers. Most of the masks were for fierce, aggressive spirits with horns and teeth the size of fingers. But four of them belonged to maiden-spirits and were delicately beautiful. Edogo remembered with a smile what Nwanyinma told him when he first married his wife. Nwanyinma was a widow with whom he had made friends in his bachelor days. In her jealousy against the younger rival she had told Edogo that the only woman whose breasts stayed erect year after year was the maiden-spirit.

Edogo sat down on the floor near the entrance where there was the most light and began to work. Now and again he heard the voices of people passing through the market place from one village of Umuaro to another. But when his carving finally got hold of him he heard no more voices.

The mask was beginning to come out of the wood when Edogo suddenly stopped and turned his ear in the direction of the voices which had broken into his work. One of the voices was very familiar; yes, it was their neighbour, Anosi. Edogo listened very hard and then stood up and went to the wall nearest the market centre. He could now hear quite clearly. Anosi seemed to be talking to two or three other men he had just met.

"Yes. I was there and saw it with my own eyes," he was saying. "I would not have believed it had somebody else told me. I saw the box opened and a python inside it."

"Do not repeat it," said one of the others. "It cannot be true."

"That is what everybody says: it cannot be true. But I saw it with my own eyes. Go to Umuachala now and see the whole village in turmoil."

"What that man Ezeulu will bring to Umuaro is pregnant and nursing a baby at the same time."

"I have heard many things, but never till today have I heard of an abomination of this kind."

By the time Edogo reached home his father was still in a very bad temper, only that now his anger was not so much against Oduche as against all the double-faced neighbours and passers-by whose words of sympathy barely concealed the mockery in their hearts. And even if they had been sincere Ezeulu would still have resented anybody making him an object of pity. At first his anger smouldered inwardly. But the last group of women who went in to see his wives, looking like visitors to a place of death, inflamed his wrath. He heard them in the inner compound shouting: "E-u-u! What shall we do to the children of today?" Ezeulu strode into the compound and ordered them to leave.

"If I see any one of you still here when I go and come back she will know that I am an evil man."

"What harm have we done in coming to console another woman?"

"I say leave this place at once!"

The women hurried out saying: "Forgive us; we have erred."

It was therefore a very irate Ezeulu to whom Edogo told his story of what he had heard at the Nkwo market place. When he finished his father asked him curtly:

"And what did you do when you heard that?"

"What should I have done?" Edogo was surprised and a little angry at his father's tone.

"Don't you hear him?" asked Ezeulu of no one. "My first son, somebody says to your hearing that your father has committed an abomination, and you ask me what you should have done. When I was your age I would have known what to do. I would have come out and broken the man's head instead of hiding in the spirit-house."

Edogo was now really angry but he controlled his tongue. "When you were my age your father did not send one of his sons to worship the white man's god." He walked away to his own hut full of bitterness for having broken off his carving to come and see what was happening at home, only to be insulted.

"I blame Obika for his fiery temper," thought Ezeulu, "but how much better is a fiery temper than this cold ash!" He inclined backwards and rested his head on the wall behind him and began to gnash his teeth.

Continuing to Think

In the West, we are used to celebrating the talents of individual artists and, sometimes, paying large sums of money (occasionally only after they are dead) for their accomplishments. Because we see ourselves as separate from each other and from the forces of nature, we prize individualism and independence.

Edogo lives in a village that celebrates the community and sees the individual as inextricably bound to it and closely allied with spiritual entities, some of whom are deceased ancestors. Unlike the Western God, who is separate from nature and creates out of nothing, Ulu seems to share the sacred space of this world with everyone else.

What do we gain and what do we lose by emphasizing our separateness? In Edogo's village there is considerably less freedom than we are used to having. But are there benefits as well as losses? Edogo, and everyone else, has a place, a role, a community. There is an old African saying: "It takes a whole village to raise a child."