'And we will keep the darker legend'

The third novel that Achebe wrote after *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer At Ease* to complete his trilogy on Igbo life, rituals and social practises is *Arrow Of God*. This third novel returns back to the bush life of the Igbos, after taking a brief sojourn into the metropolis in the second novel. It is not as if Achebe is tired of the metropolitan Other, rather he seems to be in quest for a deeper understanding of the Igbo worldview and their culture- something that the novelist was more than interested in the first novel of the trilogy. What makes this third novel stand apart is its concern with the metaphysics even more than the first one, and there seems to be an undertone of deeper acceptance of life as it is in the ageing protagonist. Among the admirers of the novel, Achebe himself seems to be one of them saying in the preface to the second edition of the novel that among all his other creations, “…it is the novel which I am most likely to be caught sitting down to read again.” (*Preface, Arrow of God*). This is not to be taken as a loose statement; it seems to be borne out of a careful consideration about the worth of the work. The preface almost reads like a prayer to the god-like priest Ezeulu, asking for his forgiveness in case of any sin committed by the race of the author, who are all the descendants of many Ezeulus across many centuries. At the very outset, there is a definite movement towards a spiritual recognition of the Igbo faith by Achebe which marks a new paradigm in his creative principle. In Okonkwo there was a sense of rebellion, not only against his father, but also against his own tribe which seemed insensitive to Okonkwo because it never really accepted Okonkwo’s desire to become a heroic presence and in the process transgress the norms and rituals of his own community. As a result, Okonkwo faced a tragic death. However, the case with Ezeulu is different. He is a titled priest, the maker of destiny of his tribe and the pedigree that he leads him to become a man who is at the centre of the sacred ties of his community with absolute subservience to the deities. This is where
Achebe has taken a literary journey, moving from the realms of doubts, heroism and questions to a calm acceptance of the Igbo way of life, even amidst the ravaging presence of British colonialism. Another facet of the novel is that Achebe dedicates this novel to the memory of his father Isaiah Oka for Achebe. Taking the risk of making a grand sweeping statement without proper support of facts, one wonders if this has something to do with Achebe’s motive to strongly entrench himself in his roots through his fictional narrative. And Ezeulu is the father figure, the guardian priest of the entire Igbo tribe and throughout the novel Ezeulu leads by example to keep the sacred ties of the Igbo community intact with a general focus on its metaphysics.

The myth formation in this novel is more rooted to identity politics of the Igbo tribe, and the readers get a sense that Achebe is moving towards a form of fiction that represents its cultural context even more strongly ever than before, and hence this novel by Achebe seems more encompassing and mystical in its intent. There seems to be an apotheosis of Ezeulu when he plays a hide and seek game with the new moon that will determine his announcement of the yam festival. The “third nightfall” (Arrow Of God, 1) seems unlucky, as number ‘three’ projects the mystical dilution in the Igbo cosmology that can be apprehended only by the chief priest. “His [Ezeulu’s] obi was built differently from other men’s hut” (Arrow Of God, 1), writes Achebe, and we get an early glimpse of how myth formation is closely related to the politics of hierarchy and identity in the Igbo society. Jeyifo identifies the post-colonial authors, writing in an age of America dominated late capitalism, as “ex-colonial” (Jeyifo, 56). However, Jeyifo’s assertion that post-colonial authors use the textual strategy in order to re assert and re discover the colonial cultural norms that are dislocated by the hegemony of the colonial enterprise seems simplistic. The reason is that Achebe is not really asserting the Igbo identity; there is no real need for that unless one is suffering from any inferiority complex, and rather Achebe is more interested in re interpreting the identity
and the normative structures of the Igbo community. In that way, he is not going back to any kind of roots, he was already rooted. Rather, he represents a cultural capital in his fictional construct which has serious implications in mythologizing the tribal ethos, as also demythologizing it in terms of ideation on the part of the author that does not hesitate to go against the norms of his ‘roots’. Achebe does not look at the past as a monolith, as a long unproblematic narrative as he observes in “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation”:

The question is how does a writer re-create the past. Quite clearly there is a strong temptation to idealize it-to extol its good points and pretend that the bad never existed. This is where the writer's integrity comes in. Will he be strong enough to overcome the temptation to select only those facts, which flatter him? If he succumbs he will have branded himself as an untrustworthy witness. But it is not only his personal integrity as an artist, which is involved. The credibility of the world he is attempting to recreate will be called into question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts. We cannot pretend that our past was one long, technicolour idyll. We have to admit that like other people's past ours had its good as well as its bad sides. (Achebe, web)

Rather he re-interprets and re-analyses the past through his lens of fiction and forms his own myth within the historical paradigm of his tribe. Achebe’s literary exercise is based on this constant endeavour to move back and forth in the time scales, between a past that continuously refurnishes and reorients the narrative strategy of the present, and the present that tirelessly strives to get defined by the frame of reference of the past. However, between the past and the present lies the spatio-temporal gap that changes the ideation between the ‘then’ myth and the ‘now’ myth. The ‘then’ myth had a particular context that produced the text, mostly in the oral form, and the ‘now’ myth has to function in a different society with a different social obligation, ideological compulsions and power structures. So the rise of the
moon must be coincided by Ezeulu with his own political compulsion to please the British, in particular Captain Winterbottom, something the priest’s ancestors did not have to confront with. Previously, the Ezeulu happened to be the sole patriarch of the tribe, but in colonial Nigeria, the power balance shifted, and in that way the head priest has to accommodate the sacred ritual and myths with the political compulsions in mind. Laurence Coupe states, “…all myths presuppose a previous narrative, and in turn form the model for future narratives. Strictly speaking, the pattern of promise and fulfilment need never end; no sooner has one narrative promise been fulfilled than the fulfilment becomes in turn the promise of further myth-making. Thus myths remake other myths, and there is no reason why they should not continue to do so, the mythopoetic urge being infinite.” (Coupe, 2007:108). What Coupe seems to suggest is a myth formation from a deconstructive point of view; with every re-formation of new myths, they move more distant from the central original premise with which the original text was formed. Mythopoesis is this decentralised narrative structure, which constantly reforms the source text from which it was derived. Achebe takes the help of the myths in order to define the power structures of the society that he deems to represent but at the same time those myths are often refashioned in order to suit the narrative requirements of his novel. The fiction of Achebe does not necessarily always reorient the past, the past often is used as a historicised character to shed light on the present, as Ezeulu is forced to send his son to the white man’s school, otherwise his own position within the clan seems to be jeopardised by the threat of ousting by the British. The new moon that shines over Ezeulu’s obi is described as thin, resembling a boy who is maltreated by his foster-mother. Achebe is able to bring the world of myth and the world of realism on the same plane. It was common for the patriarch to have multiple wives, and it was symbolic of the index of masculinity in the tribe, and maltreatment of foster mothers was not exactly very uncommon. The moon and the tribal practice of institutionalising multiple marriage therefore forms a
composite representation of the sacred ties in Igbo (*Arrow of God*, 2), even though there is no
effort to critique this practice by Achebe. The rupture at the social level that occurs due to the
British imperialism is anticipated by the moon which is described by Ugoye as “an evil
moon” (*Arrow of God*, 2). The sighting of the new moon is absolutely crucial for the
declaration of the yam festival, and then it can be inferred that the moon itself becomes a part
of the fertility cult when the ‘Mother Nature’ is worshipped as the provider and nurturer of
existence in the physical life form. Then, it follows that if the fertility cult itself is anticipated
as an evil presence, the residents have enough reasons to worry that something dreadful is
imminent. Igbos are yet to be colonised by the agnostic philosophy of the west and hence the
moon, with all its awkward appearance, seems to announce a future that does not seem too
promising. And they will be proven right. Obiageli hence sings the song of an uncertain
future:

*The moon kills little boys*

*The moon kills ant-hill nose*

*The moon kills little boys… (*Arrow of God*, 3)*

In a significant comment Achebe says that the Igbo people “…lays a great deal of emphasis
on differences, on dualities, on otherness”, as opposed to the western intellectual ideation
which is “fanatically single-minded in its own self-centredness” (Ogbaa, ‘Interview’, 65).
This comment by Achebe however problematises his discourse, because the ‘self’ and the
‘other’ are in a relationship which is not mutually exclusive. That is, the ‘self’ and the ‘other’
confers ‘meaning’ to each other and without the presence of the other, the self cannot exist. In
that sense, Achebe makes his argument open to charges of binarisation and his politics
become at times, separatist. What Achebe means is that the Igbo world is essentially a world
of communal presence, where the sacred ties of social normativity are of paramount
importance. Tendencies to move towards an individual response to life is equated to
challenging his ‘chi’, which is a sacrilege that one can hardly afford to commit, as we have seen with Okonkwo. Ezeulu does not challenge his ‘chi’ to the extent that Okonkwo does as the latter is interested in becoming an authoritarian leader in his tribe, but the case with Ezeulu is different. He has to function within the opposite social forces of Igbo tradition and British colonial enterprise and he tries to balance the two with devastating consequences. What make the myth formation in the novel even more significant are the shifting tendencies of Ezeulu to interpret the various rituals of his tribe at different junctures of history in order to fit the context, so that he can rationalise the Igbo rituals with the foreign colonialism. In this plurality of interpretation lies the chaos of the text and of the context that produces it and in doing so Achebe opens up the text to “infinite range of normative possibilities, diversity of disputing processes… intricate connections between everyday behaviour and the living law” (Innes, 72). The normativity itself is the living principle of the Igbo life, however not to be automatically connected with the usual temper of Eurocentric negativity that is associated with the concept of being normative. Normativity has been made to become a set of binarisation which is systematically projected into a narrative of negativity in the postmodern conception of ideas. No doubt that Achebe’s politics grow out of a necessity to protest against the normativity of the colonial project, but the social praxis of Igbo is more complex than just being instrumental in protesting against Eurocentric order. The coloniser is looked upon as the alien, the ‘creature’ who is at the very margins of the consciousness of the Igbo tribe, but within the internal structure of their society, normativity is the base on which stands the law of social ties. This may be the case with Western societies too, but whereas contemporary critics would critique any attempt made to normativize, Achebe points to the fact that a society without any normativity would collapse under its own contradictions. Achebe critiques the way Ezeulu pose himself as so rigid that he delays the yam festival for the call from Winterbottom, but at the same time the Igbo ties cannot dissuade itself
completely from normative structures, that would mean that the binding force of social structuring would collapse. The mythical sub base of the society conditions the general psyche to bear consenting subservience to the head priest and that is how the hierarchy of the society is preserved. In a moment of divine role playing, Ezeulu thanks the god Ulu “for making me see another new moon” (*Arrow of God*, 6). The power structure works from top downward and hence the myth of the new moon becomes a privileged vision for the head priest. If he sees the new moon, others will follow his instructions for the yam festival; his absence from the process will lead others to be marginalised in the belief system. Ezeulu does not simply have the privilege or the responsibility to declare the yam festival, he is the sole representation of the carrying forward of the tradition, in him lies the responsibility to protect the ‘chi’ of his tribe. Since ‘chi’ is the very principle of existence in the Igbo cosmology, hence Ezeulu becomes the man in whom the entire tribe must depend in order to keep the wrath of the gods at bay. Myth is borne out of a naturalistic philosophy, where there is a close interconnection between nature and the lifestyle of the Igbos; hence Ezeulu’s prayer that they should be protected from the scorpions and snakes. The fear psychosis in the untameable nature calls forth the Eurocentric misrepresentation of looking at the ‘dark continent’ with fear and Othering it as savage and uncivilised. As is the case, the tribe based society had not learnt to colonise nature for an industrial based urban society, and the myths reflect the genesis of a society that still looks at nature with reverence and the provider of all means to exist on this planet. The forest people grapple with inter-tribal conflicts, violence and the fear of death, and the mythical base of their belief helps them to represent their inner fears and insecurities in order to unite at the level of community.

It is important to analyse the classical distinction that has been made between history and myth, or more precisely for our purpose, between historical tales and mythical tales. Isidore Okpewho says that the mythical tales tend to be more ‘poetic’ as compared to the
historical narratives, as the historicity of the text itself forces it to be more faithful to the historical characters and is bound by time and space. Given an African context, Okpewho reminds us that there is always a battleground drawn between the rational judgement of the European enlightenment and the enlightenment of Africa that has more faith in oral narratives and fictive details of the myths. Isidore defines, as it were, the term myth and states that:

Myth is not really a particular type of tale as against another, it is neither the spoken counterpart of an antecedent ritual, nor is it a tale determined exclusively by a binary scheme of abstract ideas or a sequential order of elements. It is simply that quality of fancy which informs the creative or configurative powers of the human mind in varying degrees of intensity. (Okpewho, 2009:69)

The point that needs to be emphasised here is that in the myth formation of Achebe, he does not only depend on the time-inflected narrative of oral tradition, he contextualises them within a specific colonial time and space which therefore is syncretic in intent. History in the African paradigm is more mythical than analytical, if we go by Okpewho’s formulation that myths are more poetic than history per se. Eurocentric version of history is more dependent on a documentation of facts, making it a serious academic and intellectual exercise, and once the documentation is over, it is treated as a part of the knowledge capital with no scope for any changes, other than other research materials. However, the tribal structure of Umuofia treats history as a part of their oral tradition that is constructed by stories that has been passed down from generations and hence within that oral narrative, a lot of deletion, reinterpretation and consequent syncretisation of other oral cultures have taken place, making it a composite tale of various narratives. In one of the story telling sessions in the novel, Ezeulu says that how an inter-tribal conflict had led to the merging of Okperi and Umuaro. The merging had serious issues of religious identity associated with it, as the people of Okperi had said to Ezeulu’s forefathers:
We give you our Udo and our Ogwugwu; but you must call the deity we give you not
Udo but the son of Udo, and not Ogwugwu but the son of Ogwugwu. (*Arrow of God*,
15)

From the passage above, we can gauge that history in Africa is not historicised, nor is it a
careful analytical formulation of fact based thesis- history itself is mythicized by the oral
narratives, that depend more on memory as also on the authoritative principle of the head
priest, whose word is the final opinion on any matter concerned. However, Achebe does not
only create a world of metaphysics through his myth formation, it has its time bound context
as well. The above quotation was being discussed at a time when Christianity was trying to
usurp the African belief system in order to ideologically colonise the minds of Africa,
especially its young generation. The power politics in the tribal context gives mythical
anecdotes a contextual significance borne out of history. As Ezeulu points out, Okperi hands
over to Umuaro only the sons of the main gods, thereby clearly defining the margins within
which Umuaro can function vis-à-vis Okperi, since the gods define the role of the tribe in
which he is worshipped. The centre margin conflict therefore is represented in the mythology
through historical narratives which are not time bound, but defines the role of the present in
terms of a past.

While talking about the sacred ties in mythology, Eliade notes;

The sacred is qualitatively different from the profane, yet it may manifest itself no
matter how or where in the profane world because of its power of turning any natural
object into a paradox by means of a hierophany [i.e. manifestation of the sacred]”
(Eliade, 1958:30).

The term ‘hierophany’ is a contribution of Eliade to the world of cultural anthropology, by
which he effectively means that objects or concepts exist in terms of their relation to the
opposite, which takes its cue from the Hegelian principle of dialectics. That is, without the
contrary, the object cannot exist because everything in the material as well as the intellectual world is optimised by the consciousness of its binary. It is like saying that ‘black’ exists because we know what ‘white’ is. Eliade constructs the difference between ‘sacred time’, when myth was created and the ‘profane time’ when the mythic world fell to the archaisms of human rituals (Coupe, 58). Locating Eliade in Achebe could be helpful in finding newer areas of myth criticism. In the above passage for example, the transference of the gods to Umuaro is the ‘sacred time’, when the myth of transference of divine power was created, a time that is not located by specific dimensions. Ezeulu’s warning is the ‘profane time’ when he instructs his people to follow the myth tradition, thereby constructing a new cult for his people, which fall under the category of ‘profane time’. However, the question still remains as to how sacred is the sacred time at all. No doubt, that the western concept of time is very different to that of the African. Newtonian Universe theorises the Universe as divided into measurable quantum, be it in terms of time, or force, or speed, or distance and so on. The mechanical response to the universe is not typical of Africa, Africans respond to the Universe in terms of an infinite existence. That infinity can be broken down to measurable quantities, but then they are only for human comprehension or representation, rather than having any tendency to explain the Universe in terms of human behaviour or representation. The Eurocentric belief that the Cosmos can indeed be measured by quantum mechanics is not shared by the pre-colonial tribe based society in Africa and so the gods are revered as the representation of that infinite. So, the ‘sacred time’ that Eliade talks about finds relevance in the African world but not totally. The myth formation is indeed sacred, but the rituals that follow are equally sacred and not profane. The rituals do not suffer a fall in human archaisms, they form the very part of the belief system of the tribes. The myths and the rituals are the driving force behind the very existence of the Igbos and the line between profanity and sacredness almost gets obliterated, because once the ‘sacred’ comes out in the domain of the public in terms of
directions from Ezeulu, the ‘profane’ gets exercised through the rituals which are deemed ‘sacred’ by the people. The concept of time in the Igbo cosmology is a crucial factor in understanding the mythology produced by the Igbo culture. In an industrialised society of the western world, time is measured in terms of objective measurement, but in the Igbo life, time is measured by the significant events in the day. For example, the time of the new moon, the time of yam festival, the time to sacrifice to the gods and so on, which does vary according to natural cycle of seasons, and hence the quantitative constant does not exist in the Igbo concept of time, and hence not objective in its intent. Rev. Dr. John S. Mbiti, chairman of the Department of Religion at Makerere University in Uganda says in *African Religions and Philosophy*:

> When Africans reckon time, it is for a concrete and specific purpose, in connection with events but not just for the sake of mathematics. Since time is a composition of events, people cannot and do not reckon it in vacuum... Instead of numerical calendars there are what one would call phenomenon calendars, in which the events or phenomena which constitute time are reckoned or considered in their relation with one another and as they take place... (in Zaslavsky, 63)

So, myth formation is rooted in this concept of a phenomenological formula that puts entire emphasis on the particular events that are to take place, whether natural or metaphysical. The cultural dislocation in the Igbo cosmology is brought about by the colonial mission and through that, even the concept of time is re-invented in order to express the fear psychosis that rips across the Igbo land, from which even Ezeulu cannot escape. When Oduche refuses to join the church, Ezeulu points out that man has learnt to shoot birds with perfect accuracy and hence the bird Eneke-nti-oba has learnt to fly without perching. Ezeulu says his position is like that of the bird, and “the world is changing... I do not like it” (*Arrow of God*, 46). Time scale therefore traces the changing reality in the Igbo land with the British coming in,
and the arrival of the British is itself a phenomenon that is included in the calendar of Igbo which creates the rupture in the tribe at all possible levels. Time is a very significant factor in this novel, as there is a clear demarcation made between the pre-colonial and the colonial life in Umuaro, and the rupture at the socio-cultural level that is brought about by the British colonialism calls forth an unnamed fear psychosis among the Igbo people because the clash of two cultures is sacrilegious from the perspective of the Igbos; in fact the very presence of the White man in their ‘sacred’ territory is abominable. As the first step towards such sacrilege, Ezeulu sends his son Oduche to the church, he is forced to otherwise the power balance gets disrupted. It is a calculated move by the British, specifically by Captain Winerbottom to weaken the Igbos by creating a division between the different tribes of Igbo land, and the best way to achieve it by warring Ezeulu against his rivals, which will, by extension, cause a mass participation in the civil strife. Ezeulu thinks that the white man is infinitely more powerful than the Igbos, and hence the Christian ‘deity’ must be known for the welfare of the community. The rage of the gods can destroy the universe- this has been the common belief in the tribe from time immemorial, and hence in a colonial-colonised power structure, the more powerful deity must be revered. Also, Ezeulu send Oduche to the church as his representative, but as it turned out, the British used religion as a means to colonise the Igbos even further, using the unquestionable authority that Ezeulu enjoyed in his tribe as the head priest. Mythology of the Igbos is used to strike at the very root of their belief system in order to construct Christianity as a religion of highest order. Ezeulu could understand the deeply sinister politics of the British a little later, when he had already sacrificed Oduche to the church, despite opposition from his village folks and his wife, but since he was the patriarch of his obi, there was no reason for him to listen to any opposition. Later he could realise that the new religion was trying to appropriate the old order; “allow him a handshake and he wants to embrace” (Arrow of God, 43).
The devastating influence of the British comes to the forefront initially with the python episode. Snake, especially the python is revered by the Igbo as one of the principle deities of their cosmology, and the Christians of course consider it as the Original Tempter, the very symbol of anti-Christian terror. The church use it as a bait to strike at the very belief of the Igbo for religious appropriation, and Oduche is forced to imprison a python within a box. Later when the whole episode is discovered, the entire village is shocked to see an abomination of this extent being caused:

'May the Great Deity forbid', said Anosi.

'An abomination has happened,' said Akueke.

Matefi said: 'If this is medicine, may it lose its potency' (*Arrow of God*, 45)

The royal python is not the deity of Umuaro, actually it belonged to the village Ezidemili, whose deity Idemili owns the royal python. As a result of this incident, there is an implosion in Ezeulu himself, who begins to realise that the British have come with deep political intentions, and not just as tourists. As a result he also understands that his religious pedigree within his own tribe is loosening, as everybody knows the role of Ezeulu in sending Oduche to the church. And as fallout of the terrible sacrilege, an imminent tussle is on the cards between Ezidemili and Umuaro. Moses, who was a convert in the church, could not accept the authoritarian stance of the British and challenged Mr. Goodcountry’s interpretation of the Bible that it does not support forcible killings of python. Moses relates to a popular fable which tells that once there was widespread killing in Umuama due to filial rivalry and the whole village was wiped out. Later they decided that to prevent such mass massacre, the six villages in the Igbo land will not kill a python (*Arrow of God*, 48). Moses presents an interesting case of the colonised subject, who is forced to be a subaltern due to sociological compulsions, but he is not entirely convinced by the politics of appropriation of the British. The church authorities use Christianity for exclusivist propositions, and not for syncretism
which Ezeulu had hoped for. Moses represents those voices who do not want to let go of their myths and rituals completely and this gives rise to serious altercations between Ezeulu and the British authorities. In fact, Moses openly challenges Oduche to kill a python in Umuaro to prove his heroism, which clearly denotes that within the converts, the consciousness of their cultural past is yet to die down. It is ironic that the converts pose a greater threat to the Church than the White man himself, because in the first generation converts, there is a growing disquiet against the effort made by the priests to constantly dismiss the African culture/religion as ‘savage’ and men like Oduche are caught in a cultural limbo- between the ‘New religion’ and the older beliefs.

The python episode leaves tremors of cultural shock in Ezeulu’s household, leading to a near-threat from Ezidemili, asking the head priest of Umuaro to purify his home for the abomination committed. Ezeulu reacts with resistance, dismissing all opposition voices, but he realises that the mythical base of the society is gaining momentum to oppose the British as also him who is responsible for such abominations being committed. The social praxis seems to have been disturbed, but the disturbing trend is that it is the head priest who is causing such social and religious rupture. Ezeulu had sent Oduche as his representative in the church, perhaps also having the equation of keeping the power balance right, but he realises gradually that the appropriation of the colonial master through its agents is far deep rooted than he had anticipated initially. In an interview to Jeyifo in 1983, Achebe comments, “The moment I became conscious of the possibilities of representing somebody from a certain standpoint, from that moment I realised that there must be misrepresentation, there must be misjudgement, there must be even straightforward discrimination and distortion” (Jeyifo, 52).

Achebe’s fiction therefore is essentially foregrounded in the humanist principles, where the ideal and the practical coexist. The ideal world of the Igbo myths is tempered by the real world where the myths play the role of anecdotes that forewarns the tribe of consequences in
case of abominations committed. Myths are the living principle of the tribe and no one is expected to overreach, not even the head priest. Achebe’s excerpt from one of his interviews testifies to the fact that the politics of representation is crucial in his fictional construct and that he avoids any undue idealisation. The various myths that Achebe uses in this novel are more depictive of the rupture than any unifying principle which validates the author’s point that misrepresentations and misjudgements must be there in order to portray the essential human nature of his characters. The myths and rituals are ‘evil’ from the perspective of the British officers. Winterbottom is petrified with the very timescale of night as the “unspeakable rites” that goes on in the forests seem to portray the “heart-beat of the African darkness” (Arrow of God, 30). Thus, the rituals seem to construct a clear binary between the spirit of Africa and the spirit of Europe, the latter being the invader. Significantly, Achebe creates a counter narrative in his fiction, trying to validate the cultural space of the Igbo community which has a demonic identity in the eyes of the coloniser as the Other. So the myths and the rituals become a kind of political and cultural statement by the author to represent the African space in the way he thinks authentic, or very near to it. Hence the world of the Igbos, dominated by myths is the world of ‘true’ Africa, and Winterbottom’s perspective of it is the distorted vision of the continent, where he sees it as a continent which is dark, and primitive, savage like. Myths and rituals therefore play a very interesting part of reflecting the ethos of the Igbo community which has a distorted and inglorious picture in the mind of the Whites. To Winterbottom, who represents the political oppression of the British, Umuaro is still backward because it has not let the ‘modernity’ of the British to enter it, whereas Okperi is a welcome breather since it has allowed the colonial progression to enter its space. The Captain hence perspectivises ikenga as a ‘fetish’ since it is a sacrificial practice among the Ibos and hence is a symbol of anti-Christian terror as also against the enlightenment principles of Europe. Myths play the role of constructing of the insider-
outsider dialectics, and the subsequent resultant change in perspective gives an apt commentary on the way Africa is seen from the inside and the outside.

Myth-making in Africa is a production of the oral tradition and hence myths are narratives which are generated in story-telling sessions, involving a spontaneous performance by the speaker and are inclusive of the audience. Myths are generated as an experience of the entire community, based on their shared concerns, fears or insecurities, as also their happiness, festivities and sense of belonging. In such public performances, the myths that are generated orally form the collective identity of the tribe and hence myths form the agents of cultural production. The role of the auditors is of paramount importance in such sessions, as they also contribute to the creative process by either appreciating the story or changing it wherever it is deemed necessary, and so they are quite fluid in their aesthetic production, getting reinterpreted and re-shaped by the audience. As Herskovits points out, “One usage that is as common to discursive speech as to narrative is the interpolated explanation from the listener, or listeners” (Herskovits, 52). Such interpolations are never considered as unnecessary interventions; rather they are a necessary ingredient of the collective experience that such myths are supposed to explore. The last point becomes crucial in the novel because in the face of colonial appropriation, reinstating the faith in the age old customs becomes important to assert the cultural identity of the marginalised Igbo people. Nwaka goes through such a story-telling session, as he relates his challenge to Ulu, the supreme deity of the godhead. The myths carry the audience to a time that is beyond the comprehension of human psychology. However, as Achebe is a myth maker within the textual space of the novel, hence his resource material is carefully sieved to meet the contextual relevance of the text that he is writing. Achebe employs a kind of double frame narrative, where the outside frame is taken up at a neo-realist level, involving the story of Ezeulu and Winterbottom. The inner frame constitutes the myths that locate the text firmly in the oral tradition of the Igbos. It is
the interface between the text and the sub-text that makes the readers aware of the role of the
myth in the Igbo cosmology, as they are the abiding metaphysical principles that shape the
thought process and the way of living at the physical level. Hence, the overreaching attitude
that Nwaka showed in venturing into the territories of Ulu (which is not allowed) without any
kith and kin resulted in immediate reprobation. He meets with three friends− them being a
wizard, a poisoner and a leper. The unholy trinity almost anticipates the sacrilege that Oduche
commits, and the entire crowd participates in the story, as “The crowd replied, ‘His arm is
very strong’. The flute and all the drums joined in reply” (Arrow of God, 40). The crowd
wandered how Nwaka could defy Ulu, and still live to boast about it, and it finds the ironic
parallel to Oduche’s abomination when entire Umuaro is shocked to see their beliefs being
thwarted by the son of Ezeulu. However, one has to remember that since there are so many
tribes in Nigeria, their pride in their identity is also constricted to their own tribe. The myths
and the rituals often help to assert their pride in their community, and the identity is
constricted locally to the tribe rather than having any widespread nuances. Nwaka is a
resident of Umuaro, but his friendship with Ezidemili makes him a sworn enemy of Ezeulu.
So Ezidemili refuses to sit on the ground in his obi, stating “Idemili belongs to the sky and
that is why I, his priest, cannot sit on bare earth” (Arrow of God, 42). So mythology is used to
rake up issues of racial pride and inter-tribal conflict, as Ezidemili points out that Ulu belongs
to Ezidemili rather than Ezeulu. He knows why the soul of an Ezeuluor Ezidemili moves out
of the body after death and hung up in the shrine, because Ulu wanted it that way. So
Ezidemili claims to have superior knowledge and enlightenment about the dictats of the gods,
and in that way he commands a higher position in Umuaro as compared to Ezeulu, at least he
claims so. Myths then become the representation and the expression of the power struggle
within the tribes in Umuaro. They become the site of inter-tribal conflicts and struggle for
territorial and spiritual supremacy, as the warring parties claim to have a better hold over the
gods and the result that ensues is struggle and violence which are necessary to hold the
domination of a tribe in a given point of history.

Jan Vansina, in *Oral Tradition As History*, points out that generation of oral tradition,
of which myths are a part, are constructed and passed down generations, leading to numerous
interpolations in the tales. Vansina identifies two types of oral traditions- one where the tales
have passed orally but are within the lifetime of the orator or the narrator who is presenting it,
and the other type where the tale was a cultural production of an age much before that of the
narrator. Vansina calls the first one “immediate history”, where “the historical consciousness
in the communities involved is still in flux” and the second type consists of, what he terms
‘memorized messages’ (Vansina, 1985:13). In Achebe, the oral history is more a product of
fiction, but at the level of narrative, both Vansina and Achebe construct an oral culture that is
both time-bound and timeless. The oral narratives are passed down generations, form part of
social and religious normativity that governs the way a tribe believes in various ethos and in
turn influences the way they live. At the same time, the ‘immediate history’ is also equally in
function as Ezeulu must interpret the current events in terms of the past oral strictures, and
hence the flux is always working and reworking itself through the interpretive politics of the
head priest. However, in Achebe the oral tradition is individualised and subjectivised. No
doubt, oral narratives are indeed a collective production of the spatio-temporality of the
Igbos, but the head priest has the right to judge and interpret it according to his own will;
something that causes the rupture in the novels of Achebe. Because, in more occasions than
one, Ezeulu twists the do’s and the don’ts in order to accommodate the British instructions in
order to maintain his power equation with the colonial masters, as he needs to buy peace to
conserv e the Igbo ethos. However, when the British pressure is yet to mount, Ezeulu orders
for the opening of the Festival of the First Pumpkin Leaves on the Nwoko market day. The
sacred order of the festival is declared, based on a time calculated by the lapse that happens
between two market days, rather than on any mechanised format of time, as in the Western world- this is how the myths are formed in the Igbo narrative. This is the ‘mythic time’ that Okpewho talks of- a time that is computed by the occurrence of a natural event or cosmological phenomena, because this is a society that is so overtly dependent on the oral beliefs and myths to function. The women gather in their finest clothes, with ornate jewellery as the whole festival is associated with the fertility cult of bounteous nature. The Igbos are yet to colonise Nature for human progress and the reproductive cycle of nature is both revered and celebrated as it is the only source of sustenance to the tribal population. The oral tradition gets a special attention during such festivals, as Ezeulu’s role in the tribe becomes magnified as he stands tall as the representative of the gods and having the power to ward off evil that may mar the future. The left side is the side of the negative powers in the Igbo cosmology, and hence the left side of Ezeulu’s body is painted in white chalk. On the right hand he carries the Nneofo which is a staff and represents the ultimate authority of Ezeulu in Umuaro. Once again the ritualistic mode of the myths delineates the power structure of the Igbo community, with the pre-supposition that every member of the community is expected to strictly follow the norms of the tradition (Arrow of God, 71-72).

The process of construction of myth is a process of historicization. JanVansina notes that myth is a narration that belongs to a “timeless past” and “justify the bases of existing society and correspond to Malinowski’s myth as social charter” (Oral Tradition, 23). In a way therefore, myths form a part of the historical consciousness of a given society and it helps to construct the identity of that society. Umuaro is, as it is, struggling with the imperial rule of the British, and the historical consciousness is indeed necessary to make the people aware about the history of the tribe that may be negated by the colonial masters. Ezeulu himself identifies with the ‘mythical time’ of a ‘timeless past’ by stating an immemorial past
that he was a part of, but the common people are not privileged enough to be a part of that history:

At that time, when lizards were still in ones and twos, the whole people assembled and chose me to carry their new deity. I said to them:

‘Who am I to carry this fire on my bare head? A man who knows that his anus is small does not sallow his udala seed.’

They said to me:

‘Fear not. The man who sends a child to catch a shrew will also give him water to wash his hand.’

I said: ‘So be it’” (Arrow of God, 71) (Italicised in the text).

This section delineates how power structures are made through the historicised narrative of myths. Lizards are part of the cosmology of Igbo beliefs, and hence the reverence that they command is transferred onto the head priest who seems to have a direct communion with the gods. The significant fact is that the gods represent the time immemorial, and it is beyond the human intellect to comprehend them. Myth as a narrative is associated with such a time, even though it must be remembered that the narrativisation itself is a part of human aesthetics and imagination, and hence is very much a part of ‘our’ time. This may sound like stating the obvious, but the reason why it must be mentioned is because oral literature in non-literate societies is a literary exercise that happens across many years, even centuries. Tales are made, told and then they get evolved by getting syncretised with other tales as they move across that scale of time and space. So, the tale that Ezeulu relates is a part of human aesthetics, but then it represents a cosmic consciousness. Myths in their own way bridge the gap between the temporal time and the cosmic representation that they claim to project. Ezeulu is a man who is rooted to his own culture and time, but the ‘cosmic time’ to which he claims having access to create him as a class apart and helps to construct the sacred ties of the
Igbo community. This is necessary for the social institution of Igbo to function, because it is firmly embedded in the patriarchal norms, headed by Ezeulu. The myth of the sacred ties positions Ezeulu as the one who wards off evil and is the progenitor of life on earth, at least in Umuaro. Such is the cosmic power of Ezeulu that he had defeated the forces like Eke, Oye and Afo, in order to restore order on earth. In the ritual of drawing circles in the market place, one finds the symbol of defining the roles of the various classes of people in Umuaro. In fact, the line is being drawn by the head priest himself in a spiritual daze, which signifies the fact that he has the right to define the boundaries of the society within which it should function. So the women invite him to cleanse the village of its sins and Ezeulu now takes up the role of the saviour, who can save the Igbo community from the wrath of the gods. The Chief Priest runs towards the shrine and the people are relieved to find him safe in his haven, “triumphant over the sins of Umuaro which he was now burying deep into the earth…” (Arrow, 73). The cult of driving out the evil is then joined in by the people who stamp their feet on the ground to admonish the darker sources on the day of the festival. However, it is Ezeulu who leads the charge, and within the religious praxis the power structure is clearly delineated as working on a top downward direction, and the Chief Priest is the only one who has the right to interpret the rituals and direct people towards, what is believed to be, the right way of performing them.

To come back to the question of historicization, it must be remembered that the past should be held captive in the present in order to continue the relevance of the mythical base of the society. One way of arresting the past is to create the sanctity of the tales by associating with religion that in most cases works through fear psychosis- the fear of abomination that may ultimately lead to social and metaphysical isolation. Ezeulu’s actions in the new pumpkin leaf festival denotes this point that the past is always constructed as something that needs to be revered, even though the tales and the myths may have been
interpolated many times across many centuries. The past itself then deemed to be a monolith, no matter if it has many layers in the process historicization of the myths. Vansina in fact coins the term “floating gap” (Vansina, 24) because everything that is deemed to be the past is thrown back to the time of origin without any layers of chronology. It means that the narratives which are passed down generations need not be always be considered in terms of chronology, because the tales coalesce with each other and hence the chronicity of time in the tales cannot be identified, and so the ‘origin’ of the tales cannot be located in a particular time. Hence, as in the case of Ezeulu, the phrase “at that time” becomes emblematic of a past that lies at the coordinate of origin and then straight after that, in the cycle of time comes the present moment in which he is addressing the audience. Thus, Ezeulu becomes a party to the myth of origin along with the deities, and he therefore commands the tremendous respect and reverence from the entire tribe. He is the undisputed political and spiritual leader because he has the access to the memory of a time immemorial, which lies outside the purview of basic human comprehension. Hence myths help to create his personality as well as his identity of Chief Priest by placing knowledge of history on the high altar of privileged enlightenment, which is the sole spiritual and intellectual property of Ezeulu.

The identity formation of the tribe is an important motive in the Igbo cosmology since ohaka is such an important reality in the tribe, meaning that community is supreme. However, in the process of maintaining the rule of the community, sometimes the subterranean forces of fear grips the consciousness of the people since the very fear of rupture causes the emotion of dread to take over. The “Okpasalebo tree” (Arrow, 79) is warded off as a troublesome object since it is a tree that has the power to create enmity between brothers after a session of drinking wine, extracted from the tree. Edogo and his wife spend sleepless nights, fearing about their son’s future because his skin drastically changed over to cocoyam colour, and the little child had stopped sucking his mother’s milk (Arrow,
91). On another instance, guns are shot in the forest to ward off evil, since Ogbuefi Amalu is very sick. Akuebue informs that by the look of things, it seems that the sickness was recurred during eke, and it is aru-mmo (Arrow, 112). So, coming back to the concept of ohaka, the basic construct of the community is deemed to remain intact at any cost. The tribal system of society functions in such a manner that that the unity of the tribe is maintained with gusto, even if force is needed. To be more specific, it is the social fabric that is protected with the help of the belief systems in place so that there is no rupture at the level of society. That is why the community activities are given such prominence in the Igbo culture, since through these activities, a shared identity is built up. The myths help in this process of creating that formation of a communal identity which is so necessary to protect the shared values of the people. Benedict Anderson, in Imagined Communities (1991), envisions communities in terms of a floating ideology that cannot be fitted into any Universalist tendencies of normativity. The Igbo community has its own belief system in place, in terms of its folk culture comprising of myths, tales, music, dances, musical instruments, mathematical conceptions, calculating time in terms of cosmic phenomena, storytelling sessions, and a huge pantheon of gods and so on. It is but expected that effort will be made to maintain the beliefs so that no implosion crops up in the tribal society that will endanger the very identity of the tribe. One of the ways in which the identity is preserved is through the storytelling sessions in the Igbo world, and through that the myths are given a socio-historical context by trying to bridge a gap between the mythical time and the present time, so that the people begin to realise the need to follow myths. In such storytelling sessions, performance becomes a key ingredient because without it, the audience cannot be captivated in the tale. Harold Scheub observes that among the Xhosa in South Africa, performance becomes a key element in making the audience to participate in the collective experience of imagination. He states,
No proscenium arch exists, there is no safety in distance and darkness. Everyone is known: the artist emerges from the audience and, her narrative completed, is again swallowed up by the audience. The separate emotions and experience of individual members of audience are woven into the narrative being evoked. The artistic experience is a complex one. The members of the audience know the images; they have experienced them scores of times. They know the performer intimately and she knows them. The artist seeks in a variety of ways to involve the audience wholly in her production. (in Okpewho, 77)

The engagement of the audience is of paramount importance, without which the very social fabric of the tribes falls flat. The knowability factor of the audience is an interesting facet in the performance because that knowledge tells the audience about the significance of the myths through its repetitive style. In the Igbo cosmology, the fabric of myth is known to all. However the performance factor brings in the question of fear because the performance by the story-teller not only reinstates the faith of the people in the myths, but also warns them about the consequences that might follow in the case of abomination. The power structure in place makes sure that the status quo is maintained so that the prevalent social or political praxis is not threatened by any forces that may deem to destabilise the existing power relations. That is why, the priest, or any other head figure in the village is rated so highly, rather they position themselves as the progenitor of whatever that happens in the village so that the people are appropriated into the system. However, autocracy should not be confused with such a political or religious absolutism because the general will of the people is such that they accept such a structure without questioning the legitimacy of those in power. The social fabric is set in such a way that the general will of the people is directed towards the acceptance of the social ties of the Igbo community, headed by the priest, who is the mediator between the earthly existence and the world of the gods, and there seems no dissatisfaction
among the individuals to follow such a ‘hegemony’, at least there is no such hint in the text. The metaphysical traits that are found in the tribe is a result of an age old mythical belief that constructs Ezeulu as the final embodiment of people’s collective fate and the will of the people is submerged in the thought that it is indeed an eternal, time tested narrative, and challenging that would be an abomination. The post-modern conception of grand narrative would perhaps challenge such social ideologue, but the Eurocentric idea does not accommodate the reality of a community where individual will is given very little space, especially in the Post-War era. Even in the concept of destiny, the ‘chi’, one finds that it is not individualism in the way Europeans would regard the semantic range of that word. ‘Chi’ no doubt is the individual fate of a person that is affixed to him by the gods, but then that individuality is not an assertion of the ‘self’ as much as it is an assertion of the role of the gods in an individual’s life. That is, for every person, there is a different ‘chi’ at work, but that does not amount to the fact that an individual is allowed to move beyond the realms of the ‘sacred ties’ and construct his own space within the community. The Igbo philosophy would situate every human being on an individual platform on the larger cosmic time scale, but nobody is given the freedom to decide his course of life. Rather he is expected to abide by the rules of the gods, with the knowledge that the gods have predestined his fate. He however must work within the matrix of the Igbo society and willingly so.

African literature is a body of creative and critical exercise that deems to project the social norms much more than expressing the individual modes of representation like human aspiration or psychology. Achebe as a writer is aware of the fact that he has an ideological responsibility to project Nigeria to a global audience so that the world does not stereotype the Africans as ‘savages’ or ‘niggers’. Literature then becomes a part of socio-cultural statement and hence society itself becomes a character in Achebe’s novels rather than projecting human characters isolated from the collective destiny of the society. Wole Soyinka notes:
...the writer is far more preoccupied with visionary projection of society... this is because, in reality, the umbilical cord between experience and form has never been severed... (Soyinka, 64)

Soyinka uses the word ‘visionary’ not in the sense of being mystical or removed from the everyday reality, but he uses the word in the sense that a contemporary African writer needs to envision his society and its architectonics as a qualitative approach to literature or other forms of art. In that way an African writer becomes socially committed and ideologically expressive of a particular way of writing literature - that is to compose it by binding the forces of humans, nature and society and trying to find out the interplaying relationship between all these factors. Myths become one of the tools to represent this social commitment of the author, not only does he counters the racial slur against the Blacks, but he also constructs an alternative mode of literature as compared to the European ones. Nature becomes a source of subsistence as also an expression of a way of living, and this is least surprising of a non-industrialised society that seeks to unite nature with the very presence of the human beings in nature. Okeke Onenyi points out that the knowledge of herbs and anwansi is “inscribed in the lines of a man’s palm” (Arrow, 147). There is a blood tie between nature and the human race, and that explains why the myths are so preoccupied to explain the relationship between the gods and the human beings or the trees and plants. The hierarchy in the cosmic scale is to be internalised within the consciousness and nothing is to be done that disturbs the order of nature. Colonialism as a political phenomenon is explained through fables and myths because the unfamiliar terrain is so distant from the people’s common experience that they need common models of representation to understand the unfamiliar. Myths are used to counter the politics of hegemony and aggression of the British. It could be said however, that those myths create a counter paradigm of their own hegemony, trying to alienate the British as people from a different experience. However, one needs to also bear in mind that it was the British
who was on a colonial mission and not the Africans, and so myths operate as a narrative of counter hegemony (at times). When Captain Winterbottom sends his men to arrest Ezeulu, because he deemed it rather undignified for the head priest to go and meet somebody on the outside, Winterbottom immediately gets a bout of fever. Everyone believes that Ezeulu must have charmed him and the White man has got his due. Myths then become a mode of functionality, operating in the people’s mind as tools to counter threat of appropriation. Even the steward of Mr. Clarke warns his master that one who annoys the priest is a bad juju man (a reprobate) and it is best avoided. Even the Christian convert Igbos are more tilted towards believing their native customs and traditions which speaks about the deep rooted effect of myths in the social consciousness of the Igbos. Achebe wrote a fable called *How The Leopard Got His Claws* (1972) where he discusses the role of myths in the society through creative literature. The leopard in the jungle was a very kind and generous king, but one day, the deer cried out:

O leopard our noble king
Where are you?
Spotted king of the forest,
Where are you?
Even if you are far away
Come, hurry home:
The worst has happened to us
The worst has happened to us…
The house the animals built
The cruel dogs keep us from it,
The common shelter we built
The cruel dogs keep us from it,
The worst has happened to us

The worst has happened to us... (Achebe, 1972:18)

However, since the leopard was out of jungle he couldn’t come on time, and when he eventually did, he had no teeth or nails. Seeing his powerless situation, the animals admonish him, thereby angering the leopard. He then turns to terror and eats up the animals to force them into submission and the fable ends with the hope that someday peace will return to the jungle. There is not much need to find any parallel at the situational point between this fable by Achebe and the novel, but the real point is that the myths and fables reflect the power structure in place and in a way becomes a narrative that projects the power institutions in place and how they work. Ezeulu might be compared to the leopard, who loses his position of power while being away from his ‘obi’. His absence causes the whole Igbo society to remain in a state of confusion, because the sacred ties have not trained them for such an unforeseen circumstance. The significant anecdote over here is that when the leopard fails to live up to its image and expectations of being the king, he is promptly rejected and substituted by another animal. Ezeulu perhaps fears the same kind of backlash from the people of his community when he tries to move closer to the power centre. However there is enough self-doubt in Ezeulu, and he is never successful to completely engage himself with the colonial mission and that creates the trouble in the political as well as the personal front.

Ezeulu suffers from psychological conflict because he cannot quite justify to himself his act of moving towards Winterbottom to himself. In one of his dreams he saw that when his grandfather rose to speak the entire audience rise in revolt and shouted out “He shall not speak; we will not listen to him”. They even propose to drive out the British forcefully and some of them spat at Ezeulu in the dream, saying he is the “priest of a dead god” (Arrow, 160). The anxiety is not only of annihilation but also of not following the sacred ties of the
Igbo. He sees this dream when he is imprisoned by the British for daring to stay at home when they called for him, and after eighteen years of priesthood, he was almost relieved that for a small time, he will not have to carry the burden of his identity. The compulsive identity of being the priest created the rupture in his mind and he was never quite sure as whether he should follow the Igbo ethos, or he should encourage the people to please the Whites and their ‘alien’ religion. The dream is a kind of a vision that Ezeulu sees, and in that moment of transformation, he could realise that his position as the oracle of the sacred ties is slipping under his feet. That is the quality of vision- it not only entails the duties of the priest that is divinely ordained, but also it tells the priest’s slippage from his position. Ezeulu, no doubt, tries to keep up his stature pronouncing that he will not be subservient to anyone except Ulu, but the readers get the notion that he is fast losing his position.

There is a spatial quality to the working of myths, and once when the space is interchanged, the area of influence of the myths also become less functional. Ezeulu’s obi was the seat of oracle, the very fortress of all Igbo cultural practices and its preservation through tradition, but in the White man’s domain, that condition of influence does not work with the same power. Okpewho identifies the area of struggle in the Igbo community, where individualism happens to be the “first principle” (Okpewho, 232), even though that individualism must function within the praxis of social ties. Myths reflect this unique proposition of the Igbo life, where Ezeulu finds it difficult to balance between the Igbo rituals and the life that he is forced to lead in imprisonment. To give an apt cross reference, Babalola gives us a collection of *ijala* chants, which are mostly praise poems. Here is one such chant:

Let not the civet-cat trespass on the cane rat’s track.

Let the cane rat avoid trespassing on the civet-cat’s path.

Let each animal follow the smooth stretch of its own road. (Babaloba, 62)
There is a definitive stance on the part of the traditional myth maker to hegemonise the role of man in society through the fable of the civet-cat, and this is exactly where Ezeulu finds the going getting tough. The ‘chi’ has fixed a particular space for every priest to operate, and going beyond that assigned scope of functioning is to commit sacrilege. Ezeulu finds himself entrapped in his own net, his desire to get closer to the British boomerangs and he has no words to justify his act to his own tribesmen once he is jailed. The only fortress that Ezeulu can still hang on to is the world of the myths. John Nwodika explains that the British indeed have committed an unpardonable offence by imprisoning the head priest during the market days, and now Ezeulu can hold his ofo against the White man without anyone blaming him for doing so. The question then really is what happens if the ‘civet-cat’ does not hold to its ‘own smooth road’. ‘Chi’ is something that is unique for every man in the Igbo cosmology and its working is problematized in the case of Ezeulu. While he is returning to his village from a long imprisonment, it starts to rain. It seems like a metaphysical intervention where Ezeulu finds him extremely lonely, and there are no houses in the vicinity to take shelter in. Ezeulu’s marginalisation is not only because of the political hegemony of the British, but also because of his own actions within his own tribe. Nobody questioned his authority of interpreting the Igbo myths and rituals till the social and the religious order was intact, but the moment abominations were initiated by Oduche under the surveillance of the Christian priests, the Igbo people began to question Ezeulu’s step to send his son to the White man. Ironically, the peace that Ezeulu hoped to broker with the British turns around on its head and creates a rupture within the Igbo ties. Ezeulu now can foresee that he is caught up by his own arguments and his real threat is from within his own community. Jan Vansina calls people who preserve tradition as ‘encyclopaedic informants or men of memory’, while he is discussing the performance based motive of myth formation (Vansina, 55).² Performance in oral literature can take various forms, ranging from rituals, dramatic representations during
festivals to religious rites, but none of the processes is static. The representations change due
to temporal or cultural flux, without the acute awareness on the part of the audience that
something indeed has changed. The audience cannot be aware of any ‘original’ version of the
performance because of its fluid character. No myth can be pointed to a particular point of
time of creation, and nobody among the audience knows how or when interpolations went
into the performance, and hence they take the present version as the most trusted one.
Performers are hence the living carriers of the tradition, according to Vansina, even though
they cannot be called oral historians per say because they are not documenting or analysing
history- they are more creative artists trying to carry forward the Semitic constructions of oral
performances. Ezeulu can be identified as one of these ‘men of memory’ who is responsible
to uphold the oral base of the tribe. The problem with Ezeulu is the conflict between the past
and the present. The mythical time can be essentialised as immemorial, over which only he
can have the right to interpret. However, the present actions of Ezeulu do not conform to
dictates of the mythical past and this contradiction in Ezeulu is enough to raise serious doubts
in the tribal men’s mind. The python episode and sending Oduche to the church does not go
down well with the people, not even with Matefi, the eldest wife of Ezeulu. The present
conflicts with the past because in the sacred ties of Igbo the past is always the constant frame
of reference against which the present actions are weighed. The mythical base of ideology
forms a strong narrative in the collective conscious of the Igbo population and twisting the
present towards a fluid interpretation is always not easy, not even for the head priest.

The concept of time is indeed a significant component of myth making in the Igbo
community. Time, as has been discussed earlier, is not a mechanically commodified entity in
the Igbo cosmology; it is calculated more on the time of cosmic phenomena or natural
happenings. The yam festival is an extremely important ritual in the cycle of seasons, as it
symbolises the bountiful blessings of nature as the giver and the agent of sustenance of the
human race. It is the duty of the head priest to declare the date of the yam festival, based on the position of the moon in the sky. Achebe’s novels erupt with ruptures within the social system due to the effects of colonisation, and even in the case of the yam festival, this implosion is made evident. Ezeulu is imprisoned by the British as he refused to play a pawn in hands of Captain Winterbottom to be the agent of indirect rule policy of the coloniser’s administration. While imprisoned two new moons appear and disappear, but the new yam festival could not be announced. The whole festival is supposed to define the cyclical nature of human activities- to harvest crops, feed the animals, or plan for the next harvest—everything gets disordered by Ezeulu’s inability to announce the yam festival. One half of Ezeulu was his humanus genus but the other half was the mmo- his “spirit side” (Arrow, 192) that dictated to him what to do when as the priest. When he misses the time of the yam festival, questions begin to rise in the village. The whole of Umuaro sinks into a phase of uneasy peace and tension, quietly placating Oso Nwanadi in order to appease the dead souls of the forefathers (Arrow, 194). However, the mythical base of the belief of the Igbo people tells them that till Ezeulu comes back to his obi, the gods cannot be appeased to the fullest extent. The discourse of appeasing the nature seems to be a natural reaction of a community that depends so much on the agricultural front to exist. Harold Scheub, while discussing Xhosa narrative imagery states:

The connection between the oral work of art and nature is achieved by certain laws that operate to bring the images in a closed artistic system into meaningful relationships with the external world… (in Okpewho, 134)

In the Igbo world, the big udala tree serves as the concrete image in nature that serves as the bridging catalyst between the abstraction of the ancestral spirit and the material existence. Scheub calls this ‘closed’ because there is no scope for further using it for other symbolic
purposes, in the sense that the udala tree will symbolise the ancestral spirits and nothing else in the Igbo cosmology. So, Umuaro keeps itself busy with all these cultural and spiritual rites because they are eagerly waiting for Ezeulu’s return and his announcement of the yam festival. When he does return however, he cannot announce the festival immediately because the moon is not in the proper position when he returns and hence he has to stall the festival dates even though the yams are getting yellow on the field. Here again, we note the ‘closed system’ of symbols that Scheub as talking about, as we see that the moon has to be in a particular position in the sky for Ezeulu to declare the yam festival. In the meantime, the festival to impersonate the ancestral spirit commences, where the six villages file their way to the ground, wearing Masks to represent their dead ones. The mask itself is the artefact that presents a connection between the world of the spirits and that of the human beings but this particular festival comes at a very crucial juncture in the history of Umuaro. Ezeulu has just returned from his imprisonment and the yam festival cannot be declared due to the inappropriate time of Ezeulu’s return. Hence the people feel the need to appease the ancestral spirits even more for the abominations that are being committed. The masks become the symbol of an intermediary world and it had to be worn once the *ilo* has sounded. The *ilo*, the drums and the masks create an ambience of fear as the women and the children feel that the world of the dead have indeed risen- such is the power of mimesis in the oral cultures. The Mask therefore is the potent symbol that defines the spatial difference between the human world and the world of the spirits and the man who commands the unique capability to negotiate with both the worlds is Ezeulu. The post of priesthood is divinely ordained and one needs to be initiated into it before he can take up the responsibility. The villagers had asked Ezeulu’s ancestors to “*carry this deity for us*” (*Arrow*, 188; italics used in original text) and the then Ezeulu was frightened. So he bent his knees, carried the deity on his head and was transformed into a spirit. So Ezeulu commands the unique position of being able to traverse
in both the material world and the spiritual world and this gives him the highest position in the power hierarchy. Okpewho defines the ‘mythical’ as ‘poetic’ that represents the ‘larger, timeless, abstract ideals’ (Okpewho, 69) and hence the tales project the story of origin of the tribe and hence any tale or a myth will have a strong element of the ‘fanciful’ as opposed to the experiential quality of historical narratives, that are more apparently based on rational judgements. Ezeulu’s identity of the priest gives him the freedom to have a direct negotiation with the gods and pronounce their will on his behalf to the common folks. The Igbo system of belief constructs the clear cut between the world of the spirits and that of ‘this’ world, like the Evil Forest in *Things Fall Apart*, and a strict code of rules is imposed that no one should ever venture into the world of the spirits, the abomination would result not only in the destruction of the individual, but in the total annihilation of the society, following the notion of ‘ohaka’. However, Achebe’s novels are just not the documentation of the Igbo reality in times of peace, but in times of struggle, and this struggle takes a political form as the colonisers are there to appropriate the Other through Christianity, among other means. Ezeulu is right there in the middle of this strife, a bit confused as how to protect the Igbo ties when the Church is invading every possible stratum of Igbo beliefs. He talks about the sensitiveness of the snail’s horns, but he is always calculating how to reconcile and “…narrowing down the area of conflict” (*Arrow*, 190). The problem really lies in the deep rooted belief of the people in the mythical base of the society and as a part of the collective spirit; it is not easy to reorient the people’s mind to an alien culture and its anecdotes. Christianity comes with its own baggage of historical and cultural development and even the slightest attempt made to syncretise it with Igbo ideation is sure to be faced with fierce agitation. Ezeulu was already trembling because of the python episode and the possibility of an ensuing fight with Idemili, but he gets a reprieve from Ulu himself:
‘Ta! Nwanu!’ barked Ulu in his ear… ‘Who told you that this was your own fight?’

…‘You want to save your friends who brought you palm wine he-he-he-he-he… Go home and sleep and leave me to settle my quarrel with Idemili, whose envy seeks to destroy me that his python may again come to power.’ (Arrow, 191)

It becomes clear that it is not simply a case of struggle between two religions which are culturally poles apart, but it is also a struggle between two tribes who fight over their gods and the pretext is the Christian religion. Here again the ‘infamous’ British divide and rule policy comes to the forefront. Winterbottom knows very well that the various sub-tribes within the Igbo community have fierce rivalry between them, based on their belief and that rivalry often turn into battles or gaining territorial supremacy. And herein lays the chance of the White man. What Winterbottom successfully does is to hit at the very core of the mythical base of a tribe by making another tribe to do something that is considered as a horrible abomination by the first one, thereby creating mistrust and violence in the Igbo community. In the meantime, the British can enjoy the rupture and help in deepening the fissure, thereby establishing themselves as the undisputed rulers of Africa. Here, a fight ensues between Ulu and Idemili and Achebe points out as to how myths and tales are used by the external aggressor to dent in the colonised space culturally, religiously and ultimately politically.

The end of the novel is a heightening of strife at multiple levels - between Christianity and Igbo ties, Ezeulu and Oduche, Ezeulu with himself and the villagers with Ezeulu, thereby making the text multidimensional and vibrant. Ezeulu finally could declare the new yam festival after four new moons. The festival marks the beginning of the new year and it declared the cultural identity of the Igbos as this is their greatest festival. It was also the time when people reverentially thanked Ulu for protecting them against all dangers and it was also
the time when the hierarchy of the gods is defined, where Ulu is the towering presence in the
villages, surrounded by the lesser gods who were brought out only during this time. So
Ezeulu’s spiritual proximity to Ulu is understandable, it is a kind of summit between two
representatives who were most powerful in their own domains and others do not have the
right to invade in their private space. Ezeulu however had to face protests for his delaying
tactics in announcing the new yam festival, when he had to vehemently assert that “…no
Ezeulu can lose count… go back to your villages now and wait for my message” (Arrow,
204). Ezeulu is well aware of the dangers and he can feel the rupture coming. Myth suddenly
is brought down from its high pedestal of being a monolith and now the villagers ask Ezeulu
to grapple with a situation that has never happened before as “never before has the white man
taken away the chief priest” (Arrow, 208). At the same time the new yams are yellowing in
the field and Ezeulu still had three yams to eat before he could announce the festival. Such is
the situation that Ezeulu has to order the village elders to go and eat the remaining yams,
which is abnormal, but he leaves the rest to the dictates of Ulu. The strong belief of the
people is suddenly shaken and Ezeulu has to justify Ulu’s acts as a kind of testing. One of the
village elders propose to offer a sacrifice to Ulu in the form of cowries, which would cleanse
the abomination. Cowries are essential motif in understanding the god’s dictates, as
Zaslavsky notes:

   The Igbo occultist’s equipment includes four cowries. He rolls out the shells and
   examines their positions. If all four lands with the openings down, the omens are most
   favourable. (Zaslavsky, 54)

Ezeulu finds himself cornered and threatened, the village elders are beginning to question
him and Ulu himself has instructed him to stay away from the tussle with Idemili. There is
 crisis at the level of existence in Ezeulu. At the spiritual front he no longer commands the
trust of the great Ulu, and when he is not at the side of spirit, the village folks question his authority and his age in functioning as the Ezeulu. In a desperate attempt made to regain his position, Ezeulu goes to the mound representing Ulu, and in a moment of great symbolism he could hear the Church bells ringing (Arrow, 210). It is Achebe’s comment on the nemesis that Ezeulu will have to face and the entire Igbo community for that matter and along with it, it seems that Ulu is losing out to Christ. Ezeulu almost became a ‘public enemy’ overnight (Arrow, 211) and the slippage seems irreversible now. This was the moment that the Church was waiting for and in this time of crisis, they propose an alternate mode of ideation. Moses Unachukwu spread the idea that since Christ is a ‘living god’ and has power over Ulu’s anger, therefore people who did not wish to wait for the new yam festival could offer the yams to Christ and begin harvesting the crops since Christ has no qualms about getting more than one yam (Ulu was supposed to get the last yam) since He is the Loving Father of the cosmos, much greater in strength than Ulu (Arrow, 216). To become a Christian would equate to becoming a colonised subject and this is the political manipulation that the British does to gain ground in the Igbo land.

Ezeulu’s decision to postpone the new yam festival begins to wreak havoc in the village as the family of Ogbuefi Amalu is wiped out in famine. To die during uganị is the most horrific experience and one must wait till the new yams appear again before they can eat new yams. Before death, Amalu orders for the sacrifice of one bull and it becomes clear that Igbo land is fast moving towards a complete disintegration. Achebe writes that with every passing day “Umuaro became more and more an alien silence” (Arrow, 219) which bears enough testimony to the fact that Umuaro is sinking towards a total social collapse. The land which is perennially filled with the music of flutes, the beats of the drums and the chanting of the priest is now silent- an epistemological nothingness seems to grip the whole clan and the myths of annihilation begin to gain ground. If myth is a reflection of the collective ideology
of the people, then at the end of the text, the tussle is between this plural force and the individual loneliness of Ezeulu. Ezeulu is in anguish, but he is even more depressed by his helplessness as he cannot announce the new yam festival until four new moons pass as the stipulated time for the festival had already passed. Ezeulu, in the capacity of being the head priest, and the fact that half of him belongs to Ulu, cannot disobey the sacred cult of the festival and be arbitrary, even when people in the clan are dying. He remembers the time when lizards walked in one or two and chose his ancestors to bear the deity, but that mythical past which constructs the core identity of the Igbos is now at the brink of total collapse. The mythical order of the tribe faces implosion and the pain of the head priest lies at the point that he cannot protect the tradition of the unified sensibility of his ancestors that is represented by the mythical base of the society. At this crucial juncture, when Ezeulu is facing a personal and a collective crisis, his son Oduche fails to give him any comfort. Ezeulu had sent Oduche to be his representative in the centre of the colonial power structure, but unfortunately, Oduche allows himself to get appropriated by the Christian fathers and his silence in front of his father relates to the larger silence of Igbo land. Oduche is no longer ready to come back to the Igbo way of life- an ironic inversion of the inside-outside dialectics. Oduche, being an erstwhile insider of the Igbo tribe now finds the power promised in the colonial energy more luring, and hence he becomes an ‘insider’ in the Church and gets involved in their narrative, even though Ezeulu wanted his son to be an objective observant to the politics of the Church. In a mode of role reversal, Oduche becomes more of a Church man than being a spy from the Igbo side. Ezeulu wanted his son to remain an outsider to the Church and report their motives to Ezeulu, but Oduche becomes an insider to the Parish, becoming an ‘outsider’ to his own clan. This changing of position of Oduche kills Ezeulu from inside. Ezeulu’s eventual declaration of the new yam festival is ironically juxtaposed with a horrific dream that he has - the dream of absolution, of extinction. He sees that a path has been built at the back of his
obi, which was never there, and when he runs into Matefi’s hut, he sees a long dead fire, symbolising perhaps his own pyre, up for sacrifice to the gods. He could hear the voice of the solitary singer, who identifies himself as “A child of Idemili”, before he bursts into a cynical tone, saying he must “scuttle away in haste” since a “Christian is on the way” (Arrow, 223). The derisive laughter that Ezeulu hears in his dream parallels the mock laughter of Ulu that he had heard in a previous dream, and both the dream sequences prove the mental disturbance of the priest he is going through. The python episode still haunts him, and the dream not only reflects the troubled state of the priest, but it is also a metaphysical intervention that points to him about his inadequacies and failures to protect the sacred order. The struggle now is within Ezeulu, neither can he ignore the ritualistic base of his own culture, nor can he fully adhere to it because of the intervention of the British with their ‘alien’ religion and this tussle makes Ezeulu tired. The clan still holds on to its primitive rituals (not in the derogatory sense of the term) as an assertion of its age old identity, the ekwe-ogbazulobodo still beats kome kome kokome kome kokome (Arrow, 225), but there is an uneasy silence everywhere, the rituals seem to have become mere routines rather than the spontaneity that they enjoyed once from the people. The rituals were the very way of life in Igbo land, and now it seems to be bereft of life. The final chant of Obika in Amalu’s funeral remind the audience about the total annihilation that is about to come, something that was anticipated by the myth maker and ancient intelligence seems to now assert its identity. In a moment of anticipation, Obika chants out:

_The fly that struts around on a mound of excrement wastes his time; the mound will always be greater than the fly... Darkness is so great it gives horns to a dog._” (Arrow, 226. Italicised in the text)
Obika’s words seem to reverberate across the contours of the village, as he adds that the sleep that lasts from one market day to another results in death. Ezulu has indeed taken his clan towards death, and the first abomination that he had committed was to send Oduche to Winterbottom which spirals into greater and greater trouble for him and his clan. Obika uses one image after the other from the Igbo mythology, ranging from the Mother Rat which tries to protect its young ones, the little bird which hops on the ground and lands on the ant-hill may not know that it is still on the ground to death which prevents a dog to smell its excrement before its end (Arrow, 227). All these oral narratives are reflective of the condition of the Igbo land, nobody is ready to accept that the end is nearing, nobody quite knows how and when it will happen but the end is nearing. The oral stories point out to an object’s lack of knowledge about a particular incident or state that does not alter reality- reality is after all an entity of fixity and nothing can alter it; that is what the Igbo conception is about the fixity of the ‘chi’ in relation to the present. Annihilation is an objective absolute principle and not much can be done to alter it- Ulu’s world will invade at an appropriate time and lack of knowledge about it will not alter the ultimate result. As a prelude to the end, Obika dies. His performance in the ritual of Amalu’s funeral seem to have been an anticipation of his own death and Ezeulu can only cry out to Ulu, but the overpowering fate is all too potent a force for any argument. Ezeulu searched for an answer for one last time in his life- he pondered as to why he had faced so much trouble when he was following the sacred order while delaying the new yam festival. Why was Ulu so unkind to Ezeulu? The chief priest had no answer to his questions except for the fact that he was trapped by fate into a helpless situation. The epitaph that Achebe writes for his protagonist may be a fitting judgement on Ezeulu, though it is not the only story on him:
Their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors— that no man however great was greater than his people; that no one ever won judgement against his clan. *(Arrow, 230)*

The final outcome shows that even though Ezeulu was following the rituals of the sacred order, somewhere down the line he lacked the practical wisdom which is expected from a ruler. Maybe, in strictly adhering to the rules, the myths, his sub-conscious pride was expressed as he wanted to show that no man in Igbo land is more devoted to the cause of preserving the traditions. However like the poet who becomes spontaneous in his recital of oral literature, freely changing it at his own will to meet the demands of the audience, Ezeulu may have shown some flexibility to re-orient the myths in accordance to the situation. He failed in this regard, leading Igbos to spiral towards a collapse, and like the lizard that destroyed his mother’s funeral with his own hands *(Arrow, 230)*, Ezeulu was also responsible for his destruction, as also that of his tribe.

After a gap of almost twenty years, Achebe wrote *Anthills of the Savannah* in 1987. By then his art of writing had changed and this novel concentrates more on contemporary issues of urban Nigeria than his previous literary ventures, which focus more on the Igbo land in the rural tribal areas of south-west Nigeria. *Anthills of the Savannah* as a novel does not disregard the questions of identity formation through the myth narratives, nor does it shy away from the question of looking at history/myth through the critical lens of post-colonial discourse, but the form and the setting changes. This novel is closer to novels like *No Longer at Ease* and *The Man of the People* in its depiction of the condition of Nigerian socio-political scenario after independence, and these novels are not set in the bush of Igbo land but in the metropolis of Lagos, which is seen as the site of moral and spiritual corruption of modern day Nigeria. Myth formation takes a new dimension in *Anthills of Savannah* where the focus
shifts to Christian mythology and the resulting formation of shifting identities due to the
characters’ negotiation with their selves. The novel is a commentary on history and how
history can be looked at. History is itself a myth insofar as it is a subject of representational
politics, and just as myths reorient the readers to a bigger range of semantics, history also can
be refashioned to look at reality from multiple perspectives. The complexity of looking at
history is more evident in the context of post colonialism, where the colonialist past becomes
an entity of narrative strife among authors. A post-colonial author, who is trying to assert the
‘original’ identity of the nation, is at times at war with his own ideology. This is because, in
some of them, there is a tendency to create a narrative void of the effects of the colonial rule,
and there is an uncritical assessment about the pre-colonial past as something that was at a
perfect state of paradisal beauty. Achebe does not blank out the effects of colonialism as
entirely evil, nor does he construct it as something that is to be neglected. As Benita Parry
says, the age after colonialism is indeed an age of maturity, not in terms of the fact that the
colonisers have tutored the colonised about their ‘superior’ cultural subject position, but
because with colonialism, the colonised perhaps come to know about their weak spots
clearly. Parry points out that to disregard colonial history is to enact “a regressive search for
an aboriginal and intact condition/tradition from which a proper sense of history is occluded”
(Parry 1996:85). *Anthills* as a novel is not about the public history, it does not concentrate on
the issues at the macro level of society; rather its narrative functions on the plane of the
micro, involving the stories of the peoples who constitute the idea of nation. Achebe’s myth
formation is different in form in this novel. The myth formation takes a sabbatical from the
traditional tales and folklores and move towards a more contemporary negotiation with the
modern angst and the feeling of being lost and how this condition plays with Christian
mythology. In his earlier novels, Achebe used the myths as a part of his narrative strategy to
assert the sociological and ideological identity of the Igbos in the heart of Igbo land, and the
use of myths formed the central ingredient of the narrative politics. In *Anthills*, myths are more used as a sub-text so that the characters do not negotiate with the myths directly; it is more a subterranean force that comments on the ideological positions of the characters in the novel. The reason is quite obvious. The Igbos in the Igbo land were the recipient of an age old tradition of using myth as the very governing principle of their existence, their ontological self. Once they are out of that space and into the big metropolis, life becomes more pluralistic, syncretic (because of the usual cosmopolitan nature of cities and their exposure to western ideologies through mainstream media) and complex thereby erasing out the mythical base from the thought processes of the characters. This does not mean however that Achebe has lost his faith in the old world values, it is simply this that he has to negotiate his art with a different reality in *Anthills*, especially when he is talking of an autocratic military regime in Nigeria in the post-colonial era and the subsequent loss of freedom of speech and expression. History then is a crucial factor in the novel, and myths enhance the mythical character of history as an ideological construct. Talking of representation of history through language, Niall Lucy states in the essay ‘The Death of History’:

> For language to have meaning, culture has to have value and history has to matter. If the real truth, however, is that history is the lie by which culture disguises the fact of its naturally savage interests and practices in the name of human progress and welfare, then it cannot be possible to have faith in the power of plain language to convey plain truth. (Lucy, 49)

Hence ‘plain language’ is problematized by Achebe by sub-textually using myths of Christian mythology mainly to use language as a tool to express the anguish of the next generation of Nigeria. Interestingly, Achebe uses Christian mythology here rather than the Igbo ones
because in the post-colonial era, Christianity dominates over the traditional religions or beliefs, and hence the relevance.

Kangan is the fictitious space that is used in the novel as a site of struggle between the military regime and the intellectuals like Chris and Ikem. Within that space is Chris who is the ‘accused’ in the court that is presided over by His Excellency, the military dictator whose relation with Chris started during the military coup and is steadily growing sour. Let us look at the description of the dictator’s room, and the sycophants surrounding him:

He gets up abruptly. So abruptly that the noise we make scrambling to our feet would have beffited a knee-sore congregation rising rowdily from the prayers of a garrulous priest. (*Anthills*, 7)

Christian tradition in its non-Hebraic form is the point of attack here, and the ‘knee-sore’ congregation seems to be a shadow of the Puritan fathers who once ventured into Africa to ‘spread’ enlightenment and civilisation. The room seems to be a mockery of a fake paradise that His Excellency has constructed and would like the others to believe in it, and the undertone of satire is all too evident in the description of Okong, who has a “deep pulpit voice” and talks about the ‘theological’ difference that is there between the Commissioner of Works and the Commissioner for Words, but is faced by an immediate rebuttal from Commisisoner for Education as he asks Okong to not to spoil the party (*Anthills*, 8). Christianity as a worldview is not the point of rebut, rather the people who misuse the religious property through *coup de état* and patriarchal dictatorship are attacked by Achebe. Hence, the use of Biblical references as a sub-text is used as a strategy to comment on the political autocracy that runs Kangan and the sub-text creates moments of humour and satire that helps the author to criticise the problematisation of history that is done by the dictatorial rule. Christianity is not the result of the confluence of the two Testaments in *Anthills*, it is
more of a cultural signifier in the novel, and where the faith in one’s belief meets the pride
declamations of the other and between the space of hope and utter despair lays the.epistemological compromise of a new dawn for the people in Abazon. The constant mechanical sound of the air conditioners is a grim reminder of the hell like ambience in His
Excellency’s domain as it comments on the disordered ambit of politics in Kangan. Such is
the level of autocracy that His Excellency does not allow for any news of the peasant
rebellion to leak into the papers or the television- he does not want the empowerment of the
common people through information. What he really wants is absolutism of power, and hence
admonishes Okong, because he warns that Chris and Ikem can cause trouble in the designed
paradise of His Excellency. The dictator does not entertain him because he wants to preserve
the illusion that he is in complete control and does not want his Commissioner to hob nob
with rebel intellectuals. Okong feels disgraced by the treatment and blurts out, “I am in
disgrace… God, I am in disgrace. What did I do wrong” (Anthills, 20). One cannot but help
to draw a parallel to Psalm 34:17-20:

When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their
troubles. The Lord is near to the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many
are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all. He keeps
all his bones; not one of them is broken.

This extract creates the mood of despair that is the dominant emotion in the text; the Lord
needs to arrive in order to ‘crush’ the sins that is being committed by the legacy of His
Excellency, who not only seems politically unmovable but also a permanent member of the
Nigerian power hierarchy, presiding over every corruption and lust for power. The self-interrogation of Okong is a mockery of the situation- His Excellency is the pseudo-god who
rules over his domain without taking care to wipe out the despair of the ‘righteous’, as the
Psalmist promises. The pseudo-god causes despair and hence the man who began his career
as an ‘American evangelist’ and had attracted the attention of the American Baptist missionaries from Ohio has to face political repression in Kangan because he had “no sense of political morality” (Anthills, 10). Morality seems to have taken an altogether new meaning under His Excellency, very different from what a Baptist like Okong would like to believe the in the significance that is attached with traditional ‘morality’.

The very concept of destiny has been paraphrased under the autocratic regime of His Excellency, where he himself becomes the progenitor of destiny. It is a way of ruling, as the Attorney-General finds out that he must address the ruler as ‘Man of Destiny’- not only the nation’s destiny rests on him, but also the personal history of the Attorney-General is dependent on the whims of His Excellency. The Dictator wants to project himself as the champion of self-made philosophy in order to win over the support of the common people, and this has a Socialist pitch because it is wrought with an ideology (if at all) of political absolutism. Hence the Attorney-General’s devotion finds a concocted parallel with Jesus and His Excellency as the Lord had to face “same trouble” from the people. His Excellency was born in a goat-shed and his leadership is now directing the Kanganians to what ‘promised land’ is for everyone to see (Arrow, 23). Achebe’s sub textual narrative of Christian mythology is wrought with humour, sarcasm and attack on the military regimes in Nigeria through the 1960’s. Simon Gikandi observes that the novel represents the “political and cultural crisis that marks the transition from the colonial system to a post-colonial situation” (Gikandi, 1991:18). The issue then is why does Achebe use the sub-text of Christian mythology at all? As we seen already, use of sub-textual references can give the author a potent weapon of camouflaging his controversial opinions by covering it under the camouflage of the more direct references or statements that he is making. After the Biafran war, Achebe had to escape his country as a political refugee to escape execution under the military regimes of Nigeria. Speaking in 1968, Achebe comments “I find the Nigerian
situation untenable. If I had been a Nigerian, I think I would have been in the same situation as Wole Soyinka is- in prison” (quoted in Ezenwa-Ohaeto, p.137). In order to escape political censorship, Achebe might have taken recourse to sub-textual use of mythology to camouflage his critique of the autocratic military regime. From the aesthetic point of view, the use of Christian mythology in the novel points out the change of worldview and reality from the earlier novels like Arrow of God. Igbo myths are no longer the governing principles of the society, for that matter no myths are, and now myths are a part of the narrator’s tool to comment on the ideological apparatus of the novel rather than a potent reality with the characters. In such a situation, the ritualistic order of Christianity is not the narrative focus that Achebe is looking for; rather, he is keener to delineate the post-modern condition of the society that is faithless and grappling with political instability and social paranoia. The syncretic culture of the post-modern Kangan is brought to the forefront when Elewa’s uncle performs the ritual of breaking the kola-nut during the naming ceremony of Ikem’s daughter. Achebe writes that once the nut was broken, Elewa’s uncle shows his sacrifice to the Almighty. This is the intermixing of cultures that has happened in the post-colonial post-modern era of Kangan, where various cultures meet at one single point. Christian ritualism is intertwined with the Igbo cultural rites, thereby giving rise to a cross-cultural phenomenon and the mythical base of the bush land is substituted by a mixed system of faith. Christianity therefore is not a dogma in contemporary Kangan, nor is it a historicised version of any strict codification; rather it is a secularised form of religion that takes recourse to various cultural formations in order to direct the society in a more tolerant direction. Unlike in Arrow of God, where the myths and the rituals formed the very basis of the tribe’s ideology and their day to day existence, here Christianity is more a discourse that lies outside the domains of normativity and comments on the syncretic principles of the society. Hence Beatrice shows
no qualms in saying that the followers of Allah and the Christian priests can indeed shake leg together (Arrow, 208) in a moment of frenzied dance.

Benita Parry shows how Homi Bhabha’s debate on the ‘hybridity’ of culture in postcolonial identity “foregrounds the determinate constraints of ideological construction, and those paradigms privileging the conscious actor; it is also distinct from that other famous story of how history is made by human subjects, but not under conditions of their own choosing” (Parry, 9). Myths, by extension, are also products of historical development under a specific temporal continuum and hence no human imagination can essentialise the formative process in a unilinear mode of production. That is, myths, are not outside time or human knowledge, nor are they chronological as a mode of production, and so imagination cannot freely interpolate myths as narratives that lie outside human comprehension. So, the Igbo myths constantly fuse and coalesce with the text of Christian mythology in order to represent the postcolonial condition of the colonised imagination being appropriated by the ideology of the erstwhile coloniser. When Chris is going to his native village, he sees a rather strange tendency on the part of the sign writers to paint religious scriptures on the back of the buses. In this case Chris sees the sign writer copying the Lord’s Prayer in a flourish of adoration for the divine: “For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever, Amen!” (Anthills, 201). It is a sarcastic comment on the earthly power lust of His Excellency who commands absolute control over Abazon, as if he is the divine lord, leading the people to a promised land after the long struggle for independence. The rulers change, the power structure remains intact. Chris notes the curious mix of the Christian with the traditional scriptures in modern day Abazon, where simultaneously in English it is written on the bus ‘All Saints Bus’ and ‘Angel of Mercy’, and at the same time in indigenous Bassa it is written ‘Ife onyemetalu’ which translates, according to Chris, as “What a man commits” (Anthills, 202). An intellectual as he is, Chris begins to ponder about the full implications of
‘ifeonyemetalu’. What really happens if a man commits nuisance? Does he return from the land of the dead? Or do others take a revenge on him in the afterlife? Chris dismisses the “cryptic scripture” as a “full-blooded heathen antiphony” that has no relevance in the Christian domain and suffering has an altogether different dimension in Kangan (Anthills, 203). Christian indoctrination cannot perhaps explain the torture of Chris, Ikem and Beatrice under His Excellency, if they are on the right side of morality and neither is the Bassa scripture able to comment on the modern plight of these people. So, from a cynic’s point of view, the post-modern culture offers no solace in the religious or mythical narratives of the traditional world as the society lapses more and more into moral confusion. As Benita Parry observes in the above section, history and by extension myth formation, is indeed a product of human endeavour, but in the post-modern experience, the experience of rituals is itself outside history. The post-colonial experience is neither only a historical continuation of the colonial ‘past’, nor is it only a part of the pre-colonial time - it is a negotiation of both the temporal continuums and as a result, myth formation or historical consciousness (can also be designated as awareness of tradition and maintenance of it through the balance of the power relations) stands within history as a process that is constantly narrativised.

Beatrice is also the recipient of the sub-textual reference to Christian mythology. She is supposedly the genesis of Idemili, ‘The pillar of water’ and performs the ‘ritual of the woman’. It seems that there is an interesting linking of Igbo myths and Christian ideology, and this becomes evident when Chris and Ikem are discussing the various modalities of cross textual experiences. Woman as a genetic product is always the recipient of some kind of abomination that has caused the eternal plight of humankind and Ikem mentions this gendered role that has been assigned to ‘Woman’ in mythical texts. In The Book of Genesis, “She caused Man to fall”. And in the local Igbo myths, the myth maker states that once upon
a time, sky was very close to earth, but the woman cut a piece of the sky and put it in the soup, or in a moment of indiscretion, she “wiped her kitchen’s hand on the Sky’s face” (Anthills, 97). This angered Sky, causing it to move up along with the gods. Ikem is extremely critical of such gendered construction of myth and states that the New Testament, in a very refined manner, has caused the agent of Man’s eternal torment to be turned into the Mother of God, so that high up in the pristine pedestal she can be kept away from the “practical decisions of running the world” (Anthills, 98). Here, Ikem’s reading of mythology is from a gendered perspective, even though one cannot be quite sure whether the reading is validated by the traditional Igbo way of life. We are not focussing on the western way of life, because that is not the cultural or aesthetic concern of Achebe. But whatever representation of the bush life we get from Achebe’s earlier novels, it is clear that within a dominant patriarchal mode of functioning, the society does give an important space to women, that is not designed exclusively for the women, but a space where both the male and the female form an important structure in taking important decisions about the tribe and its actions. Ezinma in Things Fall Apart or Matefi in Arrow of God are strong women personalities and they command the action of the novels, as also the thought processes the male protagonist, as we have already discussed. Ikem perhaps reflects the typical neo-colonial mindset of the urban youth, who reads the local reality in terms of Western texts and tries to impose a foreign reading onto local issues, thinking that it is a ‘modern’ way of looking at things. Gayatri Spivak identifies this positionality of the postcolonial subject as a tendency to “change something that one is obliged to inhabit” (Spivak, 72). So, if Idemili is the exemplary goddess, then Beatrice is 'to bear witness' - in this case - 'to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around Power's rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty' (Anthills, 102). In any case, Beatrice is the symbol of divine purity and idealism, as in Dante and she performs the role of functioning as the saviour in a war torn country. However, Beatrice is the
descendant of the Idemili tradition, the goddess who came down in the resplendent Pillar of Water, but is a subject of male gaze as is evident in the phallic imagery of the pillar of water rising “majestically from the bowl the dark lake pushing itself upward and erect like the bole of the father of iroko trees…” (Anthills, 102). Idemili gets a shrine in the form of the lake, but the phallic image suggests that she has to function within the defined coordinate of the male world. The iroko tree is the tree of the ancestors, and as far as ancestors are concerned, the patrilineal line is the only focus of attention and the metaphor reinstates the phallic domination in the Igbo belief system. If Beatrice is the priestess, then she must preside over her rituals within the intellectual domination of Chris and Ikem, but she carves out her own space at the end of the novel. Beatrice is also the recipient of the cult of Nature worship as a feminine principle, as the great river Orimili had caused fertility to return to the desert lands. Nature in the power hierarchy is at the topmost level which provides for the creative principles, which in turn keep the power structure intact and hence the reproductive function of the ‘feminine’ Nature becomes a crucial ipso facto functionary of it. However, the duty must be functioned under constant male surveillance and hence the dry stick rises from the centre of the lake amidst the numberless shrine-houses around the lake of Idemili. A man who wishes to preserve the powerful hierarchy of ozo must wait for Idemili’s blessings, as she will make him wait along with the daughter of Almighty. Interestingly, the word Almighty has been used for the first time in this novel by Achebe, and Michael J. C. Echeruo identifies the fact that it is related to the Igbo godheads of Chukwu and Chineke. Chukwu is the supreme commander of one’s ‘chi’ and Chineke is translated as the ‘Chi who creates’, thus linking him, to the God of Genesis (Echeruo, 6). However, Idemili works as Chineke over here, as if she finds her devotee (who is a male) unworthy of carrying the hierarchy of ozo, then “she simply sends death to smite him and save her sacred hierarchy from contamination and scandal” (Anthills, 104). Beatrice is the Idemili figure in the novel, and it
is to her that Chris and Ikem look up to in order to protect the powerful hierarchy of their struggle for a free Kangan and she protects her shrine through her impeccable acts of protecting people at times of war, even though she loses Chris at a crucial juncture.

Beatrice’s witnessing act tells the audience about the appropriation of the Africans by the British under the garb of Christianity. When she reminisces about her story of the past, as a colonised subject, she could recall about her school, ‘the world of the Anglican Church compound’, the parsonages as also the catechist’s house (Arrow, 84). This explains for the narrative strategy on the part of Achebe to use Christian mythology rather than the Igbo ones because the ‘state apparatus’ has appropriated the new generation to a new order of reality and so Christian ritualism is much closer to Beatrice than the Igbo ones, which she perhaps is not aware of properly because of her temporal and spatial distance from the heartland of Igbo reality. The child consciousness in Beatrice is re-lived through her remembrance of a world that was cocooned in its own space of innocence, as she remembers her childhood games of playing with sound and its capacity to replicate itself infinitely. She is the private historian, a kind of modern prophetess who syncretises the role of retelling her visions of the past, which is one of the ways to preserve myth-through recording memory in written language. But this private myth recalls Beatrice’s role to work for a free and democratic Kangan, perhaps as a binary to the “world inside a world inside a world” (Arrow, 85) formula of her school premises. The quiet rectitude of Beatrice is borne by the fact that she was a victim of gender marginalisation right from her childhood. Her mother had desperately prayed for a boy, and when she was born, within the domestic and the larger macrocosmic politics, her mother was subjected to violence and dismissal because she was not good enough to give birth to a male lineage; sometimes she was “flogged our poor mother”, recalls Beatrice (Arrow, 86). Myth has its own charm in the child’s mind, the world of folktales often take the form of an
escapist reality in a young mind, and so Beatrice wanted to be a sorceress so that she could curse her father to death. What she dislikes the most is her Christian name given to her during baptism. What she resents more is her native name of Nwanyibuife, which means ‘a female is also something’ (Arrow of God, 87). Helene Cixous, while confronting the issue of gender stereotypification, observes:

The distinction between masculine cultural behaviour and feminine cultural behaviour [is important]... These questions are important clichés of our time and hold everyone prisoner. Culturally the people whose apprenticeship to bereavement has created a relationship to it which is open and will allow for progress are women. This is because, culturally, women have been taught how to lose, they’ve been sent to the school of losing. (Cixous, 229)

Men are also the subject of such cultural binaries, as we have seen that Obi and Ezeulu have been taught to not to be fearful or vulnerable, as it compromises with the idea of ‘maleness’. Mythology and history are gendered in their perspective and so Idemili, who is the powerful goddess of the Pillar of Water and is the progenitor of the initiation of a male lineage is herself subjected to the domination of the male, her father going to the extent of teaching her to sit like a female. Beatrice was the chosen one according to Ikem, and she is no match to “Agwu the capricious god of diviners and artists” (Arrow of God, 105). Chris could also find the ‘quiet demure damsel’ (ibid, 105) in her as she is projected as the new hope in a torn country. It is through Beatrice that Chris arrives at an understanding of the power paradigm in Kangan, which is not as simplistic as it appears. His Excellency is not the only threat for the nation, the internal mind sets are as well. Unless Idemili meets the Woman, the vision that is encapsulated in the expression of Ikem, the true vocation of Kangan will not arrive. Ikem points out to the image of the Woman, taking his cue from the New Testament, where
Woman is the Mother of Mankind. At the same time, the Woman must be integrated within the male space for Kangan to get rid of the “political inactivity or apathy” (Arrow, 100) that Ikem and Chris discuss about. Agwu is not the divinity that Beatrice is looking for; she wants to be the Pillar of Water in the Idemilian space where the Second Coming should be matched with the promise of the Lord’s return everytime the Pillar of Water collapses. Idemili is the Woman of visionary quality, she is the principle of reproduction and the Lord may help her in her journey of spiritual sustenance. Beatrice is the new avatar in the Book of Exiles, as she remembers how the old man at the hotel recounted passages which are inversions of the Book of Revelation. The old man at the Harmony Hotel pronounces the ultimate reality of struggle that tries and recounts the past in terms of the balance sheet of what was intended and what was achieved: ‘Struggling. Perhaps to no purpose except that those who come after us will be able to say: True, our fathers were defeated but they tried’ (Anthills, 118).Idemili tries to, to regenerate a new sense of hope among the Kanganians, as His Excellency seems to have won the battle with Chris and Ikem’s death. Free press is still a far cry; independence from the military regime is only a luxury that seems absolutely improbable. After recovering from her loss of Chris and Ikem, Beatrice takes up the responsibility to name Ikem’s child. Esheruo believes that Beatrice’s immediate reference is the Book of Isaiah:

In that day the remnant of Israel,  
the survivors of the house of Jacob,  
will no longer rely on him  
that struck them down  
but willtruly rely on the Lord,  
the Holy One of Israel.
A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob
will return to the Mighty God. (Isa. 10: 20-21) (Eshero, 11).

Beatrice actually names the child Amachaena, which means ‘may the path never close’ and as the Old Man puts it, a new generation has finally arrived who can bring a new spirit to the nation. They can perhaps be the progenitors of the nation’s history, not in terms of recalling the past as a time forlorn, neither as a stereotyped notion of the past as a cultural signifier to assert identity. Rather they are the generation who will bring a cognitive force into the consciousness of history, of mythology and would syncretise them to an awareness of a future that is strongly grounded in the real action of the present. Revelation finally arrives for Beatrice- she is the new age Idemili.

NOTES:

1 While talking about the origin of Eke, Oguibe argued (1997): “If the Eke is another deity at par with Chi, what about the three deities after which Igbo days are named: Orie, Afo, Nkwo? It is generally accepted that Eke is the day of creation. Interestingly, ‘eke’ means ‘to create.’” Oguibe points out that Eke is a god in some sub-ethnic Igbo Tribe, and *aru-mmo* is a fatal disease that is a result of *Eke’s* wrath. This is what Akuebue informs Ezeulu regarding the sickness of Oghuefi Amalu.

Source:

2 Jan Vansina cites this from P. Cender-Cudlip, *Encyclopaedic Informants and Early Inter-Lacustrine History.*

M.I Finley in *Myth, Memory and History* says that oral historians lack a sense of chronology in the construction of history. Ezeulu’s construction of the past is also dependent on oral tales and traditions that do not maintain any chronicity.

3 Lois Althusser in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” uses the term ‘ideological state apparatus’ to designate how ideologies in Capitalist societies are propagated through the various institutions of the State,