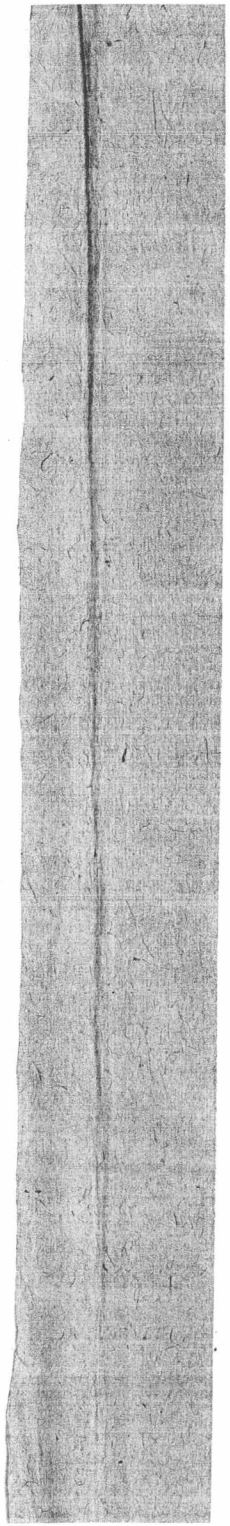
NOVELS BY

CHINUA ACHEBE

Things Fall Apart

No Longer at Ease

Arrow of God



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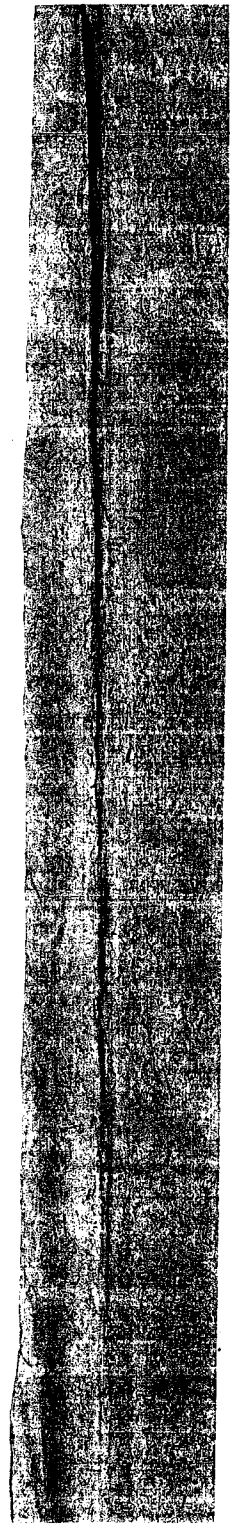

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HEINEMANN : LONDON

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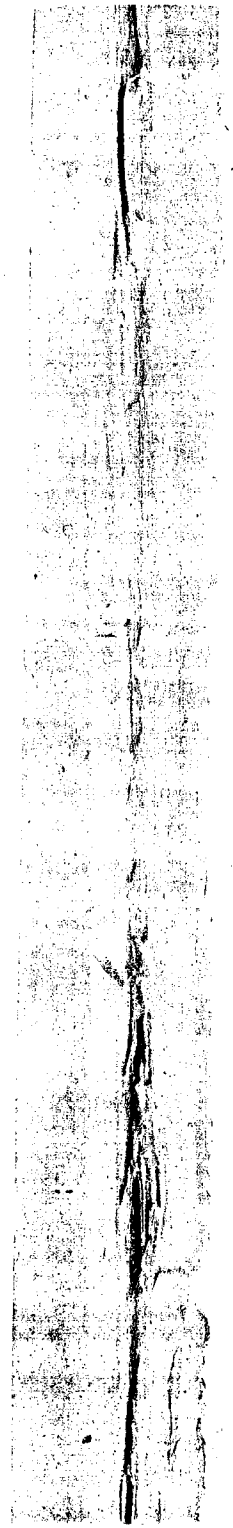
TO THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER

Isaiah Okafor Achebe



Arrow of God

Ezeulu, old and dignified Chief Priest of Ulu, god of the six villages of Umuaro, finds that his authority as spiritual leader is strengthened when a war which he has tried to prevent between Umuaro and a neighbouring community is stopped by the British District Officer, Captain Winterbottom. Ezeulu is compelled to respect the knowledge and power of the white man and sends one of his young sons to learn Christianity so that he will know the secret of this strength. But this brings the conflict between old ways and new to its height as the boy, in an excess of freshly-inspired Christian enthusiasm, tries to kill a royal python, a creature most sacred in the religious traditions of Umuaro. After this Ezeulu's opposition to the authority of the white man becomes more pronounced, but his noble obstinacy, although it achieves a temporary victory over Winterbottom, brings tragedy in the end.

CHAPTER ONE

This was the third nightfall since he began to look for signs of the new moon. He knew it would come today but he always began his watch three days before its time because he must not take a risk. In this season of the year his task was not too difficult; he did not have to peer and search the sky as he might do in the rainy season. Then the new moon sometimes hid itself for many days behind rain clouds so that when it finally came out it was already half-grown. And while it played its game the Chief Priest sat up every evening waiting.

His *obi* was built differently from other men's huts. There was the usual, long threshold in front but also a shorter one on the right as you entered. The eaves on this additional entrance were cut back so that sitting on the floor Ezeulu could watch that part of the sky where the moon had its door. It was getting darker and he constantly blinked to clear his eyes of the water that formed from gazing so intently.

Ezeulu did not like to think that his sight was no longer as good as it used to be and that some day he would have to rely on someone else's eyes as his grandfather had done when his sight failed. Of course he had lived to such a great age that his blindness became like an ornament on him. If Ezeulu lived to be so old he too would accept such a loss. But for the present he was as good as any young man, or better because young men were no longer what they used to be. There was one game Ezeulu never tired of playing on them. Whenever they shook hands with him he tensed his arm and put all his power into the grip, and being unprepared for it they winced and recoiled with pain.

The moon he saw that day was as thin as an orphan fed grudgingly by a cruel foster-mother. He peered more closely to make sure he was not deceived by a feather of cloud. At the same time he reached nervously for his *ogene*. It was the same at every new moon. He was now an old man but the fear of the new moon which he felt as a little boy still hovered round him. It was true that when he became Chief Priest of Ulu the fear was often overpowered by the joy of his high office; but it was not killed. It lay on the ground in the grip of the joy.

He beat his *ogene* GOME GOME GOME GOME . . . and immediately children's voices took up the news on all sides. *Onwa atuo! . . . onwa atuo! . . . onwa atuo! . . .* He put the stick back into the iron gong and leaned it on the wall.

The little children in Ezeulu's compound joined the rest in welcoming the moon. Obiageli's shrill voice stood out like a small *ogene* among drums and flutes. The Chief Priest could also make out the voice of his youngest son, Nwafo. The women too were in the open, talking.

'Moon,' said the senior wife, Matefi, 'may your face meeting mine bring good fortune.'

'Where is it?' asked Ugoye, the younger wife. 'I don't see it. Or am I blind?'

'Don't you see beyond the top of the ukwa tree? Not there. Follow my finger.'

'Oho, I see it. Moon, may your face meeting mine bring good fortune. But how is it sitting? I don't like its posture.'

'Why?' asked Matefi.

'I think it sits awkwardly – like an evil moon.'

'No,' said Matefi. 'A bad moon does not leave anyone in doubt. Like the one under which Okuata died. Its legs were up in the air.'

'Does the moon kill people?' asked Obiageli, tugging at her mother's cloth.

'What have I done to this child? Do you want to strip me naked?'

'I said does the moon kill people?'

'It kills little girls,' said Nwafo.

'I did not ask you, ant-hill nose.'

'You will soon cry, *Usa bulu Okpili.*'

'The moon kills little boys
The moon kills ant-hill nose
The moon kills little boys. . . .' Obiageli turned everything into a song.

Ezeulu went into his barn and took down one yam from the bamboo platform built specially for the twelve sacred yams. There were eight left. He knew there would be eight; nevertheless he counted them carefully. He had already eaten three and had the fourth in his hand. He checked the remaining ones again and went back to his *obi,* shutting the door of the barn carefully after him.

His log fire was smouldering. He reached for a few sticks of firewood stacked in the corner, set them carefully on the fire and placed the yam, like a sacrifice, on top.

As he waited for the yam to roast he planned the coming event in his mind. It was Oye. Tomorrow would be Afo and the next day Nkwo, the day of the great market. The festival of the Pumpkin Leaves would fall on the third Nkwo from that day. Tomorrow he would send for his assistants and tell them to announce the day to the six villages of Umuaro.

Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real. It was true he named the day for the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and for the New Yam feast; but he did not choose the day. He was merely a watchman. His power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his. As long

as the goat was alive it was his; he would find it food and take care of it. But the day it was slaughtered he would know who the real owner was. No! the Chief Priest of Ulu was more than that, must be more than that. If he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival – no planting and no reaping. But could he refuse? No Chief Priest had ever refused. So it could not be done. He would not dare.

Ezeulu was stung to anger by this as though his enemy had spoken it.

'Take away that word *dare,*' he replied to this enemy. 'Yes I say take it away. No man in all Umuaro can stand up and say that I dare not. The woman who will bear the man who will say it has not yet been born.'

But this rebuke brought only momentary satisfaction. His mind still persisted in trying to look too closely at the nature of his power. What kind of power was it if everybody knew that it would never be used? Better to say that it was not there, that it was no more than the power in the anus of the proud dog who tried to put out a furnace with his puny fart. . . . He turned the yam with a stick.

His youngest son, Nwafo, now came into the *obi,* saluted Ezeulu by name and took his favourite position on the mud-bed at the far end, close to the shorter threshold. Although he was still only a child it looked as though the deity had already marked him out as his future Chief Priest. Even before he had learnt to speak more than a few words he had been strongly drawn to the god's ritual. It could almost be said that he already knew more about it than even the eldest. But in spite of this no one would be so rash as to say openly that Ulu would do this or do that. When the time came that Ezeulu was no longer found Ulu might choose the least likely of his sons to succeed him. It had happened before.

Ezeulu attended the yam very closely, turning it with

the stick whenever the side nearest the fire had had enough. His eldest son, Edogo, came in from his own hut.

'Ezeulu!' he saluted.

'E-e-i!'

Edogo passed through the hut into the inner compound to his sister Akueke's temporary home.

'Go and call Edogo,' said Ezeulu to Nwafo.

The two came back and sat down on the mud-bed. Ezeulu turned his yam once more before he spoke.

'Did I tell you anything about carving a deity?'

Edogo did not reply. Ezeulu looked in his direction but did not see him clearly because that part of the *obi* was in darkness. Edogo on his part saw his father's face lit up by the fire on which he was roasting the sacred yam.

'Is Edogo not there?'

'I am here.'

'I said what did I tell you about carving the image of gods? Perhaps you did not hear my first question; perhaps I spoke with water in my mouth.'

'You told me not to carve them.'

'I told you that, did I? What is this story I hear then – that you are carving an *alusi* for a man of Umuagu?'

'Who told you?'

'Who told me? Is it true or not is what I want to know, not who told me.'

'I want to know who told you because I don't think he can tell the difference between the face of a deity and the face of a Mask.'

'I see. You may go, my son. And if you like you may carve all the gods in Umuaro. If you hear me asking you about it again take my name and give it to a dog.'

'What I am carving for the man of Umuagu is a Mask.'

'It is not me you are talking to. I have finished with you.'

Nwafo tried in vain to make sense out of these words.

When his father's temper cooled he would ask. Then his sister, Obiageli, came in from the inner compound, saluted Ezeulu and made to sit on the mud-bed.

'Have you finished preparing the bitter-leaf?' asked Nwafo.

'Don't you know how to prepare bitter-leaf? Or are your fingers broken?'

'Keep quiet there, you two.' Ezeulu rolled the yam out of the fire with the stick and quickly felt it between his thumb and first finger, and was satisfied. He brought down a two-edged knife from the rafters and began to scrape off the coat of black on the roast yam. His fingers and palm were covered in soot when he had finished, and he clapped his hands together a few times to get them clean again. His wooden bowl was near at hand and he cut the yam into it and waited for it to cool.

When he began eating Obiageli started to sing quietly to herself. She should have known by now that her father never gave out even the smallest piece of the yam he ate without palm oil at every new moon. But she never ceased hoping.

He ate it in silence. He had moved away from the fire and now sat with his back against the wall, looking outwards. As was usual with him on these occasions his mind seemed to be fixed on distant thoughts. Now and again he drank from a calabash of cold water which Nwafo had brought for him. As he took the last piece Obiageli returned to her mother's hut. Nwafo put away the wooden bowl and the calabash and stuck the knife again between two rafters.

Ezeulu rose from his goatskin and moved to the household shrine on a flat board behind the central dwarf wall at the entrance. His *ikenga,* about as tall as a man's forearm and having two strong horns, jostled with faceless *okposi* of the ancestors black with the blood of sacrifice, and his

short personal staff of *ofo*. One of the rough, faceless *okposi* belonged to Nwafo. It was carved for him because of the convulsions he used to have at night. They told him to call it Namesake. Gradually the convulsions had left him.

Ezeulu took the *ofo* staff from the others and sat in front of the shrine, not astride in a man's fashion but with his legs stretched in front of him to one side of the shrine like a woman. He held one end of the short staff in his right hand and with the other end hit the earth to punctuate his prayer:

'Ulu, I thank you for making me see another new moon. May I see it again and again. May this household be healthy and prosperous. As this is the moon of planting may the six villages plant with profit. May we escape danger in the farm – the bite of a snake or the sting of the scorpion, the mighty one of the scrubland. May we not cut our shinbone with the matchet or the hoe. May our wives bear male children. May we increase in numbers at the next counting of the villages so that we shall sacrifice a cow and not a chicken as we did after the last New Yam feast. May children put their fathers into the earth and not fathers their children. May good meet the face of every man and every woman. May good come to the land of the riverain folk and to the land of the forest peoples.'

He put the *ofo* back among the *ikenga* and the *okposi,* wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and returned to his place. Every time he prayed for Umuaro bitterness rose into his mouth. A great division had come to the six villages and his enemies tried to put it on his head. For what reason? Because he had spoken the truth before the white man. But how could a man who held the holy staff of Ulu know that a thing was a lie and speak it? How could he fail to tell the story as he had heard it from his own father? Even the white man, Wintabota, understood, though he came from a land no one knew. He had called

Ezeulu the only witness of truth. That was what riled his enemies – that the white man should come from so far to tell them the truth they knew but hated to hear. It was an augury of the world's ruin.

The voices of women returning from the stream broke into Ezeulu's thoughts. He could not see them because of the darkness outside. The new moon having shown itself had retired again. But the night bore marks of its visit. The darkness was not impenetrable as it had been lately, but open and airy like a forest from which the undergrowth had been cut. As the women called out 'Ezeulu' one after another he saw their vague forms as he returned each greeting. They left the *obi* to their right and went into the inner compound through the only other entrance – a high, carved door in the red, earth walls.

'Are these not the people I saw going to the stream before the sun went down?'

'Yes,' said Nwafo. 'They went to Nwangene.'

'I see.' Ezeulu had forgotten temporarily that the nearer stream, Ota, had been abandoned since the oracle announced yesterday that the enormous boulder resting on two other rocks at its source was about to fall and would use a human pillow to rest its head. Until the *alusi* who owned the stream and whose name it bore had been placated no one would go near it.

Still, Ezeulu thought, he would speak his mind to whoever brought him a late supper tonight. If they knew they had to go to Nwangene they should have set out earlier. He was tired of having his meal sent to him when other men had eaten and forgotten.

Obika's great, manly voice rose louder and louder into the night air as he approached home. Even his whistling carried farther than some men's voices. He sang and whistled alternately.

'Obika is returning,' said Nwafo.

'The night bird is early coming home today,' said Ezeulu, at the same time.

'One day he would see Eru again,' said Nwafo, referring to the apparition Obika had once seen at night. The story had been told so often that Nwafo imagined he was there.

'This time it will be Idemili or Ogwugwu,' said Ezeulu with a smile.

About three years ago Obika had rushed into the *obi* one night and flung himself at his father shivering with terror. It was a dark night and rain was preparing to fall. Thunder rumbled with a deep, liquid voice and flash answered flash.

'What is it, my son?' Ezeulu asked again and again, but Obika trembled and said nothing.

'What is it, Obika?' asked his mother, Matefi, who had run into the *obi* and was now shaking worse than her son.

'Keep quiet there,' said Ezeulu. 'What did you see, Obika?'

When he had cooled a little Obika began to tell his father what he had seen at a flash of lightning near the ugili tree between their village, Umuachala, and Umunneora. As soon as he had mentioned the place Ezeulu had known what it was.

'What happened when you saw It?'

'I knew it was a spirit; my head swelled.'

'Did he not turn into the Bush That Ruined Little Birds? On the left?'

His father's confidence revived Obika. He nodded and Ezeulu nodded twice. The other women were now ranged round the door.

'What did he look like?'

'Taller than any man I know.' He swallowed a lump. 'His skin was very light . . . like . . . like . . .'

'Was he dressed like a poor man or was it like a man of great wealth?'

'He was dressed like a wealthy man. He had an eagle's feather in his red cap.'

His teeth began to knock together again.

'Hold yourself together. You are not a woman. Had he an elephant tusk?'

'Yes. He carried a big tusk across his shoulder.'

The rain had now begun to fall, at first in big drops that sounded like pebbles on the thatch.

'There is no cause to be afraid, my son. You have seen Eru, the Magnificent, the One that gives wealth to those who find favour with him. People sometimes see him at that place in this kind of weather. Perhaps he was returning home from a visit to Idemili or the other deities. Eru only harms those who swear falsely before his shrine.' Ezeulu was carried away by his praise of the god of wealth. The way he spoke one would have thought he was the proud priest of Eru rather than the Chief Priest of Ulu who stood above Eru and all the other deities. 'When he likes a man wealth flows like a river into his house; his yams grow as big as human beings, his goats produce threes and his hens hatch nines.'

Matefi's daughter, Ojiugo, brought in a bowl of foofoo and a bowl of soup, saluted her father and set them before him. Then she turned to Nwafo and said: 'Go to your mother's hut; she has finished cooking.'

'Leave the boy alone,' said Ezeulu who knew that Matefi and her daughter resented his partiality for his other wife's son. 'Go and call your mother for me.' He made no move to start eating and Ojiugo knew there was going to be trouble. She went back to her mother's hut and called her.

'I don't know how many times I have said in this house

that I shall not eat my supper when every other man in Umuaro is retiring to sleep,' he said as soon as Matefi came in. 'But you will not listen. To you whatever I say in this house is no more effective than the fart a dog breaks to put out a fire. . . .'

'I went all the way to Nwangene to fetch water and . . .'

'If you like you may go to Nkisa. What I am saying is that if you want that madness of yours to be cured, bring my supper at this time another day. . . .'

When Ojiugo came to collect the bowls she found Nwafo polishing off the soup. She waited for him to finish, full of anger. She told her mother about it. This was not the first time or the second or third. It happened every day.

'Do you blame a vulture for perching over a carcass?' said Matefi. 'What do you expect a boy to do when his mother cooks soup with locust-beans for fish? She saves her money to buy ivory bracelets. But Ezeulu will never see anything wrong in what she does. If it is me then he knows what to say.'

Ojiugo was looking towards Ugoye's hut which was separated from theirs by the whole length of the compound. All she could see was the yellowish glow of the palm-oil lamp between the low eaves and the threshold. There was a third hut which formed a half-moon with the other two. It had belonged to Ezeulu's first wife, Okuata, who died many years ago. Ojiugo hardly knew her; she only remembered she used to give a piece of fish and some locust-beans to every child who went to her hut when she was making her soup. She was the mother of Adeze, Edogo and Akueke. After her death her children lived in the hut until the girls married. Then Edogo lived there alone until he married two years ago and built a small compound of his own beside his father's. Now Akueke had been living in the hut again since she left her husband's house. They

said the man ill-treated her. But Ojiugo's mother said it was a lie and that Akueke was headstrong and proud. 'When a woman marries a husband she should forget how big her father's compound was,' she always said. 'A woman does not carry her father's *obi* to her husband.'

Just when Ojiugo and her mother were about to begin their meal, Obika came home singing and whistling.

'Bring me his bowl,' said Matefi. 'He is early today.'

Obika stooped at the low eaves and came in hands first. He saluted his mother and she said *'Nno'* without any warmth. He sat down heavily on the mud-bed. Ojiugo had brought his soup bowl of fired clay and was now bringing down his foofoo from the bamboo ledge. Matefi blew into the soup bowl to remove dust and ash and ladled soup into it. Ojiugo set it before her brother and went outside to bring water in a gourd.

After the first swallow Obika tilted the bowl of soup towards the light and inspected it critically.

'What do you call this, soup or cocoyam porridge?'

The women ignored him and went on with their own interrupted meal. It was clear he had drunk too much palm wine again.

Obika was one of the handsomest young men in Umuaro and all the surrounding districts. His face was very finely cut and his nose stood *gem,* like the note of a gong. His skin was, like his father's, the colour of terracotta. People said of him (as they always did when they saw great comeliness) that he was not born for these parts among the Igbo people of the forests; that in his previous life he must have sojourned among the riverain folk whom the Igbo called Olu.

But two things spoilt Obika. He drank palm wine to excess and he was given to sudden and fiery anger. And being as strong as rock he was always inflicting injury on others. His father who preferred him to Edogo, his quiet

and brooding half-brother, nevertheless said to him often: 'It is praiseworthy to be brave and fearless, my son, but sometimes it is better to be a coward. We often stand in the compound of a coward to point at the ruins where a brave man used to live. The man who has never submitted to anything will soon submit to the burial mat.'

But for all that Ezeulu would rather have a sharp boy who broke utensils in his haste than a slow and careful snail.

Not very long ago Obika had come very close indeed to committing murder. His half-sister, Akueke, often came home to say that her husband had beaten her. One early morning she came again with her face all swollen. Without waiting to hear the rest of the story Obika set out for Umuogwugwu, the village of his brother-in-law. On the way he stopped to call his friend, Ofoedu, who was never absent from the scene of a fight. As they approached Umuogwugwu Obika explained to Ofoedu that he must not help in beating Akueke's husband.

'Why have you called me then?' asked the other, disappointed. 'To carry your bag?'

'There may be work for you. If Umuogwugwu people are what I take them to be they would come out in force to defend their brother.'

No one in Ezeulu's compound knew where Obika had gone until he returned a little before noon with Ofoedu. On their heads was Akueke's husband tied to a bed, almost dead. They set him down under the ukwa tree and dared anyone to move him. The women and the neighbours pleaded with Obika and showed him the ripe fruit on the tree which were as big as water pots.

'Yes. I put him there on purpose, to be crushed by the fruit – the beast.'

Eventually the commotion brought Ezeulu, who had gone into the near-by bush, hurrying home. When he saw

what was happening he wailed a lament on the destruction Obika would bring to his house and ordered him to release his in-law.

For three markets Ibe could barely rise from his bed. Then one evening his kinsmen came to seek satisfaction from Ezeulu. Most of them had gone out to their farms when it had all happened. For three markets and more they had waited patiently for someone to explain why their kinsman should be beaten up and carried away.

'What is this story we hear about Ibe?' they asked.

Ezeulu tried to placate them without admitting that his son had done anything seriously wrong. He called his daughter, Akueke, to stand before them.

'You should have seen her the day she came home. Is this how you marry women in your place? If it is your way then I say you will not marry my daughter like that.'

The men agreed that Ibe had stretched his arm too far, and so no one could blame Obika for defending his sister.

'Why do we pray to Ulu and to our ancestors to increase our numbers if not for this very thing?' said their leader. 'No one eats numbers. But if we are many nobody will dare to molest us and our daughters will be able to hold their heads up in their husbands' houses. So we do not blame Obika too much. Do I speak well?' His companions answered yes and he continued.

'We cannot say that your son did wrong to fight for his sister. What we do not understand, however, is why a man with a penis between his legs should be carried away from his house and village. It is as if to say: You are nothing and your kinsmen can do nothing. This is what we do not understand. We have not come with wisdom but with foolishness because a man does not go to his in-law with wisdom. We want you to say to us: You are wrong; this is how it is or that is how it is. And we shall be satisfied

and go home. If someone says to us afterwards: Your kinsman was beaten up and carried away; we shall know what to reply. Our great in-law, I salute you.'

Ezeulu employed all his skill in speaking to pacify his in-laws. They went home happier than they came. But it was hardly likely that they would press Ibe to carry palm wine to Ezeulu to ask for his wife's return. It looked as if she would live in her father's compound for a long time.

When he finished his meal Obika joined the others in Ezeulu's hut. As usual Edogo spoke for all of them. As well as Obika, Oduche and Nwafo were there also.

'Tomorrow is Afo,' said Edogo, 'and we have come to find out what work you have for us.'

Ezeulu thought for a while as though he was unprepared for the proposal. Then he asked Obika how much of the work on his new homestead was still undone.

'Only the woman's barn,' he replied. 'But that could wait. There will be no cocoyam to put into it until harvest time.'

'Nothing will wait,' said Ezeulu. 'A new wife should not come into an unfinished homestead. I know such a thing does not trouble the present age. But as long as we are there we shall continue to point out the right way . . . Edogo, instead of working for me tomorrow take your brothers and the women to build the barn. If Obika has no shame, the rest of us have.'

'Father, I have a word to say.' It was Oduche.

'I am listening.'

Oduche cleared his throat as if he was afraid to speak.

'Perhaps they are forbidden to help their brothers build a barn,' said Obika thickly.

'You are always talking like a fool,' Edogo snapped at him. 'Has Oduche not worked as hard as yourself on your homestead? I should say harder.'

'It is Oduche I am waiting to hear,' said Ezeulu, 'not you two jealous wives.'

'I am one of those they have chosen to go to Okperi tomorrow and bring the loads of our new teacher.'

'Oduche!'

'Father!'

'Listen to what I shall say now. When a handshake goes beyond the elbow we know it has turned to another thing. It was I who sent you to join those people because of my friendship to the white man, Wintabota. He asked me to send one of my children to learn the ways of his people and I agreed and sent you. I did not send you so that you might leave your duty in my household. Do you hear me? Go and tell the people who chose you to go to Okperi that I said no. Tell them that tomorrow is the day on which my sons and my wives and my son's wife work for me. Your people should know the custom of this land; if they don't you must tell them. Do you hear me?'

'I hear you.'

'Go and call your mother for me. I think it is her turn to cook tomorrow.'

CHAPTER TWO

Ezeulu often said that the dead fathers of Umuaro looking at the world from Ani-Mmo must be utterly bewildered by the ways of the new age. At no other time but now could Umuaro have taken war to Okperi in the circumstances in which it did. Who would have imagined that Umuaro would go to war so sorely divided? Who would have thought that they would disregard the warning of the priest of Ulu who originally brought the six villages together and made them what they were? But Umuaro had grown wise and strong in its own conceit and had become like the little bird, nza, who ate and drank and challenged his personal god to a single combat. Umuaro challenged the deity which laid the foundation of their villages. And – what did they expect? – he thrashed them, thrashed them enough for today and for tomorrow!

In the very distant past, when lizards were still few and far between, the six villages – Umuachala, Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezeani, Umuogwugwu and Umuisiuzo – lived as different people, and each worshipped its own deity. Then the hired soldiers of Abam used to strike in the dead of night, set fire to houses and carry men, women and children into slavery. Things were so bad for the six villages that their leaders came together to save themselves. They hired a strong team of medicine-men to install a common deity for them. This deity which the fathers of the six villages made was called Ulu. Half of the medicine was buried at a place which became the Nkwo market and the other half thrown into the stream which became Mili Ulu. The six villages then took the name of Umuaro, and

the priest of Ulu became their Chief Priest. From that day they were never again beaten by an enemy. How could such a people disregard the god who founded their town and protected it? Ezeulu saw it as the ruin of the world.

On the day, five years ago, when the leaders of Umuaro decided to send an emissary to Okperi with white clay for peace or new palm frond for war, Ezeulu spoke in vain. He told the men of Umuaro that Ulu would not fight an unjust war.

'I know,' he told them, 'my father said this to me that when our village first came here to live the land belonged to Okperi. It was Okperi who gave us a piece of their land to live in. They also gave us their deities – their Udo and their Ogwugwu. But they said to our ancestors – mark my words – the people of Okperi said to our fathers: 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. This is the story as I heard it from my father. If you choose to fight a man for a piece of farmland that belongs to him I shall have no hand in it.'

But Nwaka carried the day. He was one of the three people in all the six villages who had taken the highest title in the land, Eru, which was called after the lord of wealth himself. Nwaka came from a long line of prosperous men and from a village which called itself first in Umuaro. They said that when the six villages first came together they offered the priesthood of Ulu to the weakest among them lest it became too powerful.

'Umuaro kwenu!' Nwaka roared.

'Hem!' replied the men of Umuaro.

'Kwenu!!'

'Hem!'

'Kwezuenu!!'

'Hem!'

He began to speak almost softly in the silence he had created with his salutation.

'Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own. Knowledge of the land is also like that. Ezeulu has told us what his father told him about the olden days. We know that a father does not speak falsely to his son. But we also know that the lore of the land is beyond the knowledge of many fathers. If Ezeulu had spoken about the great deity of Umuaro which he carries and which his fathers carried before him I would have paid attention to his voice. But he speaks about events which are older than Umuaro itself. I shall not be afraid to say that neither Ezeulu nor any other in his village can tell us about these events.' There were murmurs of approval and of disapproval but more of approval from the assembly of elders and men of title. Nwaka walked forward and back as he spoke; the eagle feather in his red cap and bronze band on his ankle marked him out as one of the lords of the land – a man favoured by Eru, the god of riches.

'My father told me a different story. He told me that Okperi people were wanderers. He told me three or four different places where they sojourned for a while and moved on again. They were driven away by Umuofia, then by Abame and Aninta. Would they go today and claim all those sites? Would they have laid claim on our farmland in the days before the white man turned us upside down? Elders and Ndichie of Umuaro, let everyone return to his house if we have no heart in the fight. We shall not be the first people who abandoned their farmland or even their homestead to avoid war. But let us not tell ourselves or our children that the land belonged to other people. Let us rather tell them that their fathers did not choose to fight. Let us tell them also that we marry the daughters of Okperi and their men marry our daughters, and that where

there is this mingling men often lose the heart to fight. Umuaro Kwenu!'

'Hem!'

'Kwezuenu!'

'Hem!'

'I salute you all.'

The long uproar that followed was largely of approbation. Nwaka had totally destroyed Ezeulu's speech. The last glancing blow which killed it was the hint that the Chief Priest's mother had been a daughter of Okperi. The assembly broke up into numerous little groups of people talking to those who sat nearest to them. One man said that Ezeulu had forgotten whether it was his father or his mother who told him about the farmland. Speaker after speaker rose and spoke to the assembly until it was clear that all the six villages stood behind Nwaka. Ezeulu was not the only man of Umuaro whose mother had come from Okperi. But none of the others dared go to his support. In fact one of them, Akukalia, whose language never wandered far from 'kill and despoil', was so fiery that he was chosen to carry the white clay and the new palm frond to his motherland, Okperi.

The last man to speak that day was the oldest man from Akukalia's village. His voice was now shaky but his salute to the assembly was heard clearly in all corners of the Nkwo market place. The men of Umuaro responded to his great effort with the loudest Hem! of the day. He said quietly that he must rest to recover his breath, and those who heard laughed.

'I want to speak to the man we are sending to Okperi. It is now a long time since we fought a war and many of you may not remember the custom. I am not saying that Akukalia needs to be reminded. But I am an old man, and an old man is there to talk. If the lizard of the homestead neglects to do the things for which its wind is

known, it will be mistaken for the lizard of the farmland.

'From the way Akukalia spoke I saw that he was in great anger. It is right that he should feel like that. But we are not sending him to his motherland to fight. We are sending you, Akukalia, to place the choice of war or peace before them. Do I speak for Umuaro?' They gave him power to carry on.

'We do not want Okperi to choose war; nobody eats war. If they choose peace we shall rejoice. But whatever they say you are not to dispute with them. Your duty is to bring word back to us. We all know you are a fearless man but while you are there put your fearlessness in your bag. If the young men who will go with you talk with too loud a voice you must cover their fault. I have in my younger days gone on such errands and know the temptations too well. I salute you.'

Ezeulu who had taken in everything with a sad smile now sprang to his feet like one stung in the buttocks by a black ant.

'Umuaro kwenu!' he cried.

'Hem!'

'I salute you all.' It was like the salute of an enraged Mask. 'When an adult is in the house the she-goat is not left to suffer the pains of parturition on its tether. That is what our ancestors have said. But what have we seen here today? We have seen people speak because they are afraid to be called cowards. Others have spoken the way they spoke because they are hungry for war. Let us leave all that aside. If in truth the farmland is ours, Ulu will fight on our side. But if it is not you will soon know. I would not have spoken again today if I had not seen adults in the house neglecting their duty. Ogbuefi Egonwanne, as one of the three oldest men in Umuaro should have reminded us that our fathers did not fight a war of blame. But instead

of that he wants to teach our emissary how to carry fire and water in the same mouth. Have we not heard that a boy sent by his father to steal does not go stealthily but breaks the door with his feet? Why does Egonwanne trouble himself about small things when big ones are overlooked? We want war. How Akukalia speaks to his mother's people is a small thing. He can spit into their face if he likes. When we hear a house has fallen do we ask if the ceiling fell with it? I salute you all.'

Akukalia and his two companions set out for Okperi at cock-crow on the following day. In his goatskin bag he carried a lump of white chalk and a few yellow palm fronds cut from the summit of the tree before they had unfurled to the sun. Each man also carried a sheathed matchet.

The day was Eke, and before long Akukalia and his companions began to pass women from all the neighbouring villages on their way to the famous Eke Okperi market. They were mostly women from Elumelu and Abame who made the best pots in all the surrounding country. Everyone carried a towering load of five or six or even more big water pots held together with a net of ropes on a long basket.

As the men of Umuaro passed company after company of these market women they talked about the great Eke market in Okperi to which folk from every part of Igbo and Olu went.

'It is the result of an ancient medicine,' Akukalia explained. 'My mother's people are great medicine-men.' There was pride in his voice. 'At first Eke was a very small market. Other markets in the neighbourhood were drawing it dry. Then one day the men of Okperi made a powerful deity and placed their market in its care. From that day Eke grew and grew until it became the biggest market

in these parts. This deity which is called Nwanyieke is an old woman. Every Eke day before cock-crow she appears in the market place with a broom in her right hand and dances round the vast open space beckoning with her broom in all directions of the earth and drawing folk from every land. That is why people will not come near the market before cock-crow; if they did they would see the ancient woman in her task.'

'They tell the same story of the Nkwo market beside the great river at Umuru,' said one of Akukalia's companions. 'There the medicine has worked so well that the market no longer assembles only on Nkwo days.'

'Umuru is no match for my mother's people in medicine,' said Akukalia. 'Their market has grown because the white man took his merchandise there.'

'Why did he take his merchandise there,' asked the other man, 'if not because of their medicine? The old woman of their market has swept the world with her broom, even the land of the white men where they say the sun never shines.'

'Is it true that one of their women in Umuru went outside without the white hat and melted like sleeping palm oil in the sun?' asked the other companion.

'I have also heard it,' said Akukalia. 'But many lies are told about the white man. It was once said that he had no toes.'

As the sun rose the men came to the disputed farmland. It had not been cultivated for many years and was thick with browned spear grass.

'I remember coming with my father to this very place to cut grass for our thatches,' said Akukalia. 'It is a thing of surprise to me that my mother's people are claiming it today.'

'It is all due to the white man who says, like an elder to two fighting children: You will not fight while I am

around. And so the younger and weaker of the two begins to swell himself up and to boast.'

'You have spoken the truth,' said Akukalia. 'Things like this would not have happened when I was a young man, to say nothing of the days of my father. I remember all this very well,' he waved over the land. 'That ebenebe tree over there was once hit by thunder, and people cutting thatch under it were hurled away in every direction.'

'What you should ask them,' said the other companion who had spoken very little since they set out, 'what they should tell us is why, if the land was indeed theirs, why they let us farm it and cut thatch from it for generation after generation, until the white man came and reminded them.'

'It is not our mission to ask them any question, except the one question which Umuaro wants them to answer,' said Akukalia. 'And I think I should remind you again to hold your tongues in your hand when we get there and leave the talking to me. They are very difficult people; my mother was no exception. But I know what they know. If a man of Okperi says to you come, he means run away with all your strength. If you are not used to their ways you may sit with them from cock-crow until roosting-time and join in their talk and their food, but all the while you will be floating on the surface of the water. So leave them to me because when a man of cunning dies a man of cunning buries him.'

The three emissaries entered Okperi about the time when most people finished their morning meal. They made straight for the compound of Uduezue, the nearest-living relation of Akukalia's mother. Perhaps it was the men's unsmiling faces that told Uduezue, or maybe Okperi was not altogether unprepared for the mission from

Umuaro. Nevertheless Uduezue asked them about their people at home.

'They are well,' replied Akukalia impatiently. 'We have an urgent mission which we must give to the rulers of Okperi at once.'

'True?' asked Uduezue. 'I was saying to myself: What could bring my son and his people all this way so early? If my sister, your mother, were still alive, I would have thought that something had happened to her.' He paused for a very little while. 'An important mission; yes. We have a saying that a toad does not run in the day unless something is after it. I do not want to delay your mission, but I must offer you a piece of kolanut.' He made to rise.

'Do not worry yourself. Perhaps we shall return after our mission. It is a big load on our head, and until we put it down we cannot understand anything we are told.'

'I know what it is like. Here is a piece of white clay then. Let me agree with you and leave the kolanut until you return.'

But the men declined even to draw lines on the floor with the clay. After that there was nothing else to say. They had rebuffed the token of goodwill between host and guest.

Uduezue went into his inner compound and soon returned with his goatskin bag and sheathed matchet. 'I shall take you to the man who will receive your message,' he said.

He led the way and the others followed silently. They passed an ever-thickening crowd of market people. As the planting season was near many of the people carried long baskets of seed-yams. Some of the men carried goats also in long baskets. But now and again there was a man clutching a fowl; such a man never trod the earth firmly, especially when he was a man who had known better times. Many of the women talked boisterously as they went; the