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LITERATURAS AFRICANAS ENTRE TRADICIONES Y MODERNIDADES.

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## **Yam as a narrative element in Achebe's rural novels**

*The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe devotes his great success to his two rurally set novels: Things Fall Apart (1958) and Arrow of God (1964). Both novels coincide in portraying the autochthonous ways of living of the Ibo people precisely when they start a new moment of crisis with the British colonial occupation. Among the most relevant elements that shape this new narrative scenery, the fact that yam is the basic food in traditional Ibo diet becomes strongly meaningful in both novels. According to this, the aim of this paper is to analyze the role of yam in the development of the narrative plot of both novels.*

*Among the results of this research, I may advance some of those derive from an apparently minor circumstance: yam is a tuber, not a cereal. Thus, it is associated to this dietary factor most of the features that Achebe attributes to the Ibo community.*

Achebe, Nigerian novel, Yam.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that the Nigerian Chinua Achebe (b. 1930) is one of the most important and worldwide renowned African writers and one of the leading contemporary writers in English Language. Even when his literary production covers different genres (essays, poetry, short stories, and radio scripts), he shines for his narrative production which has given him more popularity and acknowledgment. Considering his themes and historical context, the five novels written by Achebe may be divided in two groups. One of them will be shaped by the rurally set works, centered upon the effects British colonization had on the traditional ways of living of Ibo people: *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964)<sup>1</sup>. The other would be shaped by the three novels situated in contemporary Nigeria (immediately before or after the Independence of Nigeria) and which have a mainly urban setting. *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987).

I will centered my attention on the two rural novels in which one of the determining narrative elements is the reference to yam as a basic and nuclear food in traditional Ibo diet. Certainly, the relevance of yam in Achebe's fiction is easily found and has been followed by the specialized criticism. A good example of this is *The Chinua Achebe Encyclopedia*, edited by M. Keith Booker (2003), which devotes to yam a rather extended article signed by Egejuru. On this several information of interests are included: African yam's main botanical features (not to be confused with American yam or 'sweet potato', traditional ways of cooking it, its economical relevance on Ibo context, and so on (cf. Egejuru, 2003: 286). The data obtained in this text as much as the ones got by other written testimonies, are strongly valuable, but rather scarce from my point of view, because they do not reveal the huge anthropological value yam has on the Ibo traditional diet, and we may even think that throughout Egejuru's paper it has just an anecdotal value. Nevertheless, a more detailed analysis exposes the vast transcendence of this fact that will condition the collective behavior and the social organization of this group completely. Thus, the continuous references to yam add an anthropological credibility to the texts. It does not matter if such discovery may be a mere intuition or a conscious plan made by Achebe; what it really matters, as I will

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<sup>1</sup> It would be convenient to pinpoint that the two novels support most of Achebe's international prestigious literary career. *Things Fall Apart*, the first book published by Achebe, was a literary event from the very beginning and it has been consolidated throughout the years. Millions of books have been sold all over the world, it has been translated to more than forty languages, and it has been included among the texts provided by the influential *Norton Anthology*. On the other side, *Arrow of God*, the third of the novels published by the writer, even when its commercial success was to a lesser extent important, it has been acknowledged by the critics as a primary text in Achebe's production. Its condition of masterpiece where the writer reaches his more mature and personal voice (García Ramírez, 1999: 102) is undoubtedly considered by most critics. Even the novel has been labeled as the best African novel ever written (cf. Enekewe, 1988: 33f).

attempt to show on these pages, is that it constitutes a great narrative achievement which allows the writer to show the vital and particular context of Ibo people on a crucial moment of their history in a precise way.

## YAM AS A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ORGANIZER

The current analysis takes as a starting point an obvious premise, but at the same crucial: yam is a tuberous plant, not a cereal. This may be connected to one of the discoveries of modern social anthropology that says that those populations who base their diet on cereals are able to adopt complex social structures; particularly those related with the establishment of a state: a political regime with explicit power structures, permanent military class under a central control, stable administrative structures, material culture developed with a vocation for sustainability (in the form of buildings, infrastructure...), and so on (cf. Harris, 1988: 411). It may be proved empirically that all ancient cultures with the status of state had this dietary requirement, although the cereal will vary according to the geographical location. In America the referential cereal will be the corn; in East Asia, India and other monsoon areas it will be the rice; the few Sub-Saharan African cultures which got the status of states had in common a millet-based diet; finally, the first western states (Mediterranean regions, Rich Crescent)... based their diet on wheat basically.<sup>2</sup> In the rest of the world, the remaining cultures have not reached the status of state in an autonomous way, and they have only achieved it after a process of invasion and colonial occupation on the side of the already-mentioned states. Even though the rest of the conditions are favourable, the socio-political structure will not appear if this dietary factor lacks; so that it is proved in some paradigmatic examples such as the Hawaiian Archipelago before the European colonization.

According to what I have previously said, it is quite easy to notice that traditional Ibo culture is not among those ones organized in the form of a state. There is total agreement on this fact (cf. Wren, 1980-51-61), confirmed by the lack of political unity of Ibo ethnic group. Traditional Ibo political organization was essentially based on small groups of population with a strong degree of autonomy, where clans and family relationships set up the basic social groups. To some extent, such way of living fits in with the Neolithic in a European context. With an agricultural and land-bound character, it has passed the previous stage of hunting-recollecting, but the ethnic group has a

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<sup>2</sup> Other cereals like barley, oats or rye have not been so important, probably because the cropping areas coincide with those of wheat to some extent. However, they are used as much as complementary food as ingredients for the production of alcoholic drinks, for cattle feeding, etc.

rather simple socio-political system. It is worth mentioning on this aspect that the Ibo culture contrasts with other ones from its geographical environment, where a complex state structure was reached. The most well known example is that of the ancient Benin Empire but other people like Yoruba or Hausa also had proper states before the arrival of the European colonizer. Yet all these territories included a diet based on millet. Ibo land, however, was a rather humid land due to its nearness to Niger Delta. The climate was extreme tropical and the forest were a menace for the crops, so the millet could not be cultivated<sup>3</sup>, whereas yam is perfectly adapted to these particular circumstances and is revealed as a perfect candidate to be the basic food.

These essential anthropological features of Ibo culture are revealed with accuracy and richness in details by Chinua Achebe in his two rural novels. If we take as an example *Things Fall Apart*, we may see the way in which the first part (the thirteen first chapters) is devoted to show how life was developed in Iboland before the arrival of the British colonization. The action takes place in a village called Umuofia, which is made up of several compounds named *obi*, which are the different residences of each familiar group. Umuofia is part of a federation of villages, “the nine villages” (Achebe, 1958: 3). Nevertheless, the novel makes us think that the links between villages are rather loose; they are limited to the basic commercial exchanges, a mutual defense alliance in case of external attacks, celebrations of communal festivities of the agricultural cycle, favouring exogamic marriages, but no more than this. Broadly speaking, each village has a great autonomy, as neither a Unitarian authority nor a common administration exist. In fact, even in each village, the *obi* is oriented to the economic survival as it has its own garden, farm, and store. Everyday life at Umuofia is organized by common law and by some communal meetings whose decision making has a strongly ritual and religious basis.<sup>4</sup> Definitely, under western eyes<sup>5</sup>, Umuofia represents a way of living that would be fastened to prehistory.

Classifying as ‘prehistoric’ the way of living in the first chapters of *Things Fall Apart* simply attempts to describe an anthropological context by means of an easily recognizable label without making any particular or personal judgement. It would be a serious Eurocentric assumption to assume that stateless tribal relationships are

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<sup>3</sup> One may think that rice or corn might have been introduced in a land with such features, but it is unnecessary to insist on the fact that both cereals were completely unknown for the Guinea Gulf people before the arrival of the Europeans.

<sup>4</sup> Depending on the matter developed, the decisions may be taken by an elder counsel, by a warrior counsel, or by a group of masked people who act as the incarnation of ancestral gods (*egwugwu*). It is also worth mentioning that these institutions are secular ones. The priests have power in relation to their religious functions, but they have a very small function in making decisions on the general village interests.

<sup>5</sup> Certainly, the inhabitants from Umuofia know some relatively modern resources such as the metal tools, among which we find the weapons. But the story also tells us that these instruments have been introduced by the occasional arrival of some missionaries. In spite of this, before the British occupation, its usage is neither generalized nor has meant an essential modification of the traditional way of living. Summarizing, the appearance of metals did not bring to Iboland any kind of technological revolution or the like. .

necessary worse than the complex socio-political webs of our environment. Simply, they constitute different ways of adapting conditioned by the ecological context in which every culture is developed. In fact, we may admit that the way of living represented by Umuofia's people succeeds in comparison to the modern societies, at least from the budgets of distributive justice developed by our own Western thought. It is easy to see how traditional Ibo society shows a clear tendency to egalitarianism. As a matter of fact, the land property and the means of production belong to group. Its distribution among the different members of the clan is conditioned by the familiar necessities they have and attention should be paid to the capacity of working. Thanks to this and to his personal effort, the protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo manages to improve his living until he becomes one of the most influential men of the village, despite his humble origins (his father, Unoka, was a cautious man unable to adequately cover his family). In his clan, Okonkwo's prestige was based on his dedication to the tasks associated to yam's crop and, punctually, to his value as a warrior in the rare cases in which the village maintains an armed conflict with other peoples. On the other hand, it is explicitly stated that Okonkwo is not a hunter (Achebe, 1958: 27) and he has no ability in the use of his old shotgun. In my opinion, the fact that for the Ibo agricultural activity is much more valuable socially to the handling of weapons is due not only to the fact that it's an eminently agricultural society, but it is an agricultural society *based on Yam*. Achebe (1958: 24) synthesizes the value of cropping this tuberous in a wonderful sentence: "Yam, the king of crops, was a very exacting king". Certainly, yam is a plant that gets a high performance, and provides a very nutritious food, but at the same time, is a delicate product, which requires great dedication. Before sowing, the farmer must adequately prepare the field; to avoid the jungle vegetation occupies it. Later, once the plant was born, it must be cared carefully to avoid heat to dry it. Finally, the harvest must occur at the right time, and very quickly. Get ahead on time, a harvest of yams is therefore a task that requires much more effort and expertise to other products (e.g. Mediterranean regions crops), and it is not surprising that the social prestige associate with it is consistent with such difficulty.

In accordance with the foregoing, in traditional Ibo culture, it is clear that the social position of a man essentially depends on himself and on his contribution to the Community (as farmer in times of peace; as soldier in times of war), and it does not depend on his starting economical conditions. This is something that largely connects with Western humanism ideals. But Achebe has great care in presenting us with a tribal society under utopian or perfect leanings, and put special care to make explicit some of the inequalities and contradictions of it. Thus, for example, we are confronted with a

deeply patriarchal society, where women are relegated to the household level and they lack real rights. On the other hand, there is a group of people who constitute a proscribed caste completely excluded from the social frame due to a religious taboo. They are the *osu*, which ultimately will have a significant role on the outcome of the novel, as they will be the first one in accepting Christianity and British colonial occupation as the only way of liberation. Therefore, it may be concluded that traditional Ibo society, as it is reflected in *Things Fall Apart*, has fundamentals of inequality and injustice as far as oppression (gender, caste, etc.) but it is equal withal as signs of economic exploitation are not detected in it for the simple reason that the class division does not take part in this social structure.

How could traditional Ibo society be a society without classes? My hypothesis is that this could be possible for the same reason that it was a stateless culture: having a diet based on a tuber and not on a cereal. Ultimately, social division and a political organization in the form of a State are two sides of the same coin. Now, why a diet based on a cereal has social consequences and implications which do not occur when the food base is another product? Simply, because cereals, besides the properties that enable them to be basic food (great nutritional efficiency, ease of obtaining them, enormous productive performance which allows getting surplus, etc.) have a feature that is unique to them: they may be stored for several years without losing their properties. Therefore, not only does it allow the cultivation of cereals obtaining surplus for commercial purposes, but also their storing in times of shortage, something which is not possible in non cereal societies. The long-term accumulation of surpluses is a prerequisite for the long-term economic planning, as well as the consolidation of wealth differentials which are the basis for the division in social classes. At the same time, long-term management of food surplus facilitates the consolidation of some functions related with its storage, defence, distribution, and so on which are ultimately the origin of a complex socio-political structure known as *state*.

From yam, we easily see how its possibilities of conservation are much smaller than in the case of other cereals, and it rarely exceeds two years. In practice, its storage is reduced to ensure supplies until the next harvest, and little else. Good agricultural yields allow obtaining commercial surplus (cf. Egejuru, 2003), but in a rather precarious way and absolutely subjected to the circumstances of the moment. Of course, under such conditions it is not possible to consolidate the economical existing differences among the members of the community. A succession of poor harvests would *invalidate* the profits made in years of prosperity, and *equalize in poverty* to all members of the social frame. On that score, chapter number three describes a revealing episode (cf. Achebe, 1958: 16-18). The year in which Okonkwo emancipated

from his father, and worked on his own for the first time, climate looked crazy. "Nothing happened at its proper time; it was either too early or too late" (Achebe, 1958: 16). A long drought with high temperatures was followed by heavy rainfall. Harvest was ruined entirely and famine threatened the village. Okonkwo recalls that time as the worst of his life, and was about to sink into despair. Despair that drove to commit suicide to another farmer. The striking aspect of this episode is that these terrible consequences have been caused by a *single bad harvest year*. That would have hardly happened if the cultivated product had been a cereal. In cereal societies, a bad year is a serious setback, but rarely acquires the tragic implications of Achebe's novel. With the appropriate measures of foresight, these societies may supply hard moments with the previously accumulated surplus. To illustrate what I have said so far, I think it is useful to bring out a very well known story in our western cultural context. The first book of the Bible tells us how Joseph interprets a dream of the Egyptian Pharaoh (Genesis, 41).<sup>6</sup> In the dream, seven healthy cows appear, followed by seven skinny ones which end up eating the first good ones. Joseph interprets the dream in the sense that there will be seven years of prosperity followed by seven years of difficulties in Egypt. So, he recommends the Pharaoh to appoint a wise administrator to collect as tax the fifth part of the wheat harvests during the years of prosperity, and to store them in order to have enough food for the years of hardships. As we know the Pharaoh appoints Prime Minister to Joseph, who carried out his job and saved Egypt from famine.<sup>7</sup> The next question we may ask to ourselves is the following one: could we adapt this story to the socio-political Ibo context, replacing the storage of wheat for the storage of yam? The answer is necessarily negative. This Biblical account acquires sense in the social and economical context of cereal civilizations. In a culture like the Ibo one, the massive storage of yam, as a solution against potential bad harvests, would have been completely ineffective, because food would have rotten in store before people should resort to it.

Before concluding this heading, I want to make a reference to another anthropological implications arising from the type of food which constitutes the basis of the diet in a given society. At least since Gelb (1952) there is a complete awareness that symbolic writing just occurs in those socio-cultural contexts where a state form is consolidated. Stateless civilizations reach a pictographic stage at the most, sometimes with an efficient communication (a good example comes from the Native-Indian

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<sup>6</sup> I quote from the Spanish version of the *Bible of Jerusalem*, pages 57 and following. It may be useful to pinpoint that this passage does not specify which cereal is stored (it is said *grain* simply). However, it is easy to see that he is referring to wheat if we take into account the socio-historical context.

<sup>7</sup> Obviously, this job is possible thanks to the action of an administrative organization properly created by a consolidated state. The Biblical tale, thus, is an evident testimony of the close interrelationship between a cereal diet and the existence of a complex socio-political structure.

American communities in US), but they always maintain an iconic motivation between graphic sign and referent. Everything suggests that symbolic writing was born as a result of political, economic, and administrative needs of the already consolidated states. They expanded their network of relationships and they needed to transmit and preserve the linguistic messages on a durable medium. Therefore, one of the great achievements of civilization, as it is the appearance of writing which has traditionally marked the frontier between prehistory and history, is derived from a socio-political factor: the appearance of the state, and in his turn this derives from a dietary factor: being a cereal society. Under such premises, it is natural that the Ibo culture described by Achebe lacks writing. It could not be otherwise as it is a non cereal society. But I expect to have shown that this is neither motivated by any kind of *deficit of civilization* nor by any similar argument used as a justification for colonialism. On the contrary, the absence of writing, like the absence of complex socio-political structures, is just a consequence of the Ibo village *ecological adaptation* to the difficult conditions in which its existence is operating.

#### A PLAGUE IS A HOLIDAY

At least from a European viewpoint, one of the most striking episodes in *Things Fall Apart* is probably the locust plague that comes to Umuofia (cf. Achebe, 1958: 38-40). Achebe suggests that, when the first signs of the locust's arrival take place, the entire village is mobilized in expectancy. When the plague hangs on the village and the surrounding fields, people, counseled by the elders of the community, remain locked at home until night falls. At that time, when locusts are frozen by the cold, the inhabitants of Umuofia go out in utter chaos with baskets and bags and they start to capture thousands of locusts, perhaps millions, in a kind of extemporizing part that breaks the monotony of those dates. Locusts will be captured and then cooked with palm oil. They will make up a strange delicacy for the Umuofia's people for weeks.

The contrast of this episode with the budgets of the European cultural context is radical. If we take as an example Mediterranean countries, we have to recognize that the locust plague was, at least in a not too distant past, one of the greatest misfortunes you could ever imagine. Thus, it appears among the plagues God does fall on Egypt before the freedom of the people from Israel (cf. Exodus, 10, 1-20).<sup>8</sup> Unquestionably, the scene where some inhabitants of Umuofia pray so that the locusts plague stops at night in their village would be totally unthinkable (even scandalous) in a Mediterranean village.

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<sup>8</sup> Pages, 78 and f. from the Spanish edition of the Bible of Jerusalem. In fact , it is the eighth plague.



There are two aspects of the episode of locusts which must be explained. On the one hand, the fact that the arrival of this plague is a reason for celebrating in Iboland, instead of lament; on the other, that the locusts are appreciated by the Ibo as an exquisite delicacy. Again, the answer to these questions must be found in the interaction between the different human groups with the ecosystem that develop their vital activity.

The first thing that must be taken into account is that the plagues of locusts only appear when there are relatively exceptional, and very specific, climatic conditions that often take place in desert areas. In the northern hemisphere of the African continent, the starting point of these pests cannot be other than the Sahara desert. Once formed the plague, constituted by a flock of millions of insects, it will move to other places with the help of the thrust of the winds. It is clear that in order to get this plague in the mouth of Niger, where the Ibo are settled, a North wind must blow. The wind is the famous *harmattan*, a dry wind, which as Achebe's novel explains appears at the beginning of the cold season; that is, just after the harvesting season of the yam. Thanks to this, the presence of the locust in the Ibo territory does not imply any reverse, since agricultural work have been completed this year and a few stems of no use remain in the field. Even when the plague comes before the dating of recollection, its effects are lower. This is because the foodstuff that is obtained from yam is the tuber located underground, protected from the greediness of locusts. Therefore, farmers may expect the plague passing by and then proceed to recollect the harvest, which may be carried out with little loss. With regard to this, the situation is entirely different in the Mediterranean regions and the Fertile Crescent. The plague of locusts reaches these areas pushed by the Southern winds, which usually blow in the warmer seasons (spring and early summer), when the crops are still on a ripening stage. In addition, as the basic crop is a cereal whose grains lack the protection against the insects, the effects on agriculture are devastating. The conclusion that may be drawn is that, although yam's crop is disadvantageous in comparison with the grain, with regards to the storage of surplus (as we saw in the previous heading), in relation to the effects of locusts' plagues it deserves a much more profitable assessment. So that, it is likely that this fact has also led to its adoption as a base food in many cultures of Africa, among which traditional Ibo culture is, as we have repeatedly shown.

In regards to the fact that the locusts are appreciated by the Ibo as a delicacy, we may find out an ecological motivation, though not directly related to the opposition between non cereal and cereal societies. One of the great social anthropologists of our time, Marvin Harris, has shown that the attitude that a culture has in relation to earthly invertebrates, and particularly towards insects, is strongly conditioned by the existence

of other ways of incorporating effectively dietary proteins of animal origin. Cultures with extensive possibilities of getting food from vertebrate animals, despise the consumption of terrestrial invertebrates, normally considered a taboo practice. In contrast, cultures which live in environments where a few vertebrates may be used as grocery, are forced to resort to invertebrates (insects, arthropods, etc.), and making a virtue of necessity they tend to value their culinary properties in a very positive way. (cf. Harris, 1985: 171-193). As an example of the first type cultures we may mention European populations, with multiple sources of animal protein: several species of ruminants, pigs, poultry, fishing resorts, etc. In such context, the consumption of insects or other terrestrial invertebrates has virtually no *raison d'être*.<sup>9</sup> As an example of the latter one I may include pre-Columbian Mexican cultures. It is known that before the arrival of the Spaniards, the unique vertebrate foodstuff in abundance was Turkey. Hence, invertebrates constituted an essential part of their diet necessarily. Even nowadays invertebrates are still being consumed extensively in Mexico, and are present in many Mexican typical recipes.

Reading *Things Fall Apart* brings out a lot of elements that may we think traditional Ibo culture should be classified among those which have very few alternatives for proteins of animal origin. The novel does not make any reference to fish, while references to hunting are very scarce, and invite you to think that it was not a main activity. Accordingly, meat is mainly obtained by means of livestock subsistence farming on the *obi* adjacent land. However, this farming is limited to the breeding of some goats, some poultry, and so on. With these assumptions, the episode of locusts' arrival is not anymore surprising. The coming of millions of insects is a feast for the inhabitants of Umuofia because this food is free; at least it represents an extra source for animal proteins to enrich their diet for a few weeks. And this circumstance deserves to be celebrated undoubtedly.

## THE SACREDNESS OF YAM

In the previous sections we have seen the importance of yam for Ibo culture, throughout certain passages from *Things Fall Apart*. Now we'll pay attention to another rural novel by Chinua Achebe: *Arrow of God*. Obviously, there are many anthropological elements that are repeated in this second example and the yam plays

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<sup>9</sup> A possible exception to the already mentioned matter, that does not question the general value of the exposed argument, would be the use of snails as foodstuff among the people from France or Spain. This fact, however, may be clarified taking into account that the food has a rather small incidence in the general diet of the already mentioned societies. Besides, its use is circumscribed to rural areas with short economical sources and, so, with difficulties in getting high quality meat products, on the other hand, rather expensive for these human groups. .

a key role in this case. Though, there was also an aspect that was not remarked in the previous example, at least explicitly. I am referring to what we call *the sanctification of yam*, i. e. to raise this staple food not only to the material reference along which the vital tribal cycle revolves, but to a divine gift which is used as a key element for religious rituals, and therefore it acts as a connection between the earthly and the spiritual dimension. Let's analyze it in a more detailed way.

Among greatest hits of this novel, it may be taken into account the fact that Achebe presents us with a more dynamic and vivid picture of life in the Ibo community (Wren, 1980: 75). Certainly, this novel portrays a changing world affected by the British colonial occupation (which is already fully consolidated in this story), but also obliged by a self internal process of the Ibo community. Several examples ensure this. The story is set in Umuaro, a Federation of six villages rather similarly organized to the Umuofia of *Things Fall Apart*. Now then, it is clear from the story that this Federation is relatively recent, strongly unstable and with hostile relations with its neighbours. The protagonist, Ezeulu, was the priest of Ulu, main clan divinity. Anyway, we observe that the recognition of Ulu as Chief God has taken place recently, after the unification of the six towns, and that the priests of the other divinities (particularly Idemili, Goddess of the springs) conspire against Ezeulu to seize this privileged position. The European occupants shall take awareness of these internal tensions within the Ibo community and will take advantage of it.

The novel begins when Ezeulu is waiting for the new moon to eat the fourth of the sacred yams (Achebe, 1964: 1–3). It is the traditional way of measuring the passing of time. The total of sacred yams is twelve, one for each month. This ceremony has a vital role in agricultural work, sequencing the celebration of feasts and, in general, all the activities that mark out the collective life of the village. The important thing is to check how this form of ruling time has already acquired the status of religious ritual, where yam is the main protagonist. Being the primary life support of the community, yam is perceived as the main gift the divinity has granted for human beings. For this reason, the sacred Yam ceremony also adopts the condition of sacrifice: men deliver the twelve yams to the god of Ulu as a promoting offering, in order to make him ensure their lives and estates during the twelve months of the year. What it is interpreted is that, in each monthly ceremony, the god is the one who eats yam, while the priest, Ezeulu, acts as an intermediary only.

Initially, the novel develops a complex story plot which would be long to detail. I will concentrate in the final chapters (especially the last two ones; cf. Achebe, 1964: 201-230), when the tragedy that closes the story arises, as the sacred Yam ceremony becomes important. Ezeulu is under arrest for a few weeks by the British authorities,

who try to persuade him to collaborate with them. Finally, he is released shortly before the feast of the new Yam that will bring forward the harvest. Ezeulu thinks that Ibo people is also responsible for the humiliation suffered, and takes the decision of teaching a lesson to his own people. When the harvest is ready, the priest warns that he has just eaten ten yams and so, it is necessary to wait two extra months to complete the ceremonial cycle in honor of the divinity he represents, Ulu. Otherwise, Ulu's curse will fall upon the people from the six villages. The elders remind him to take into account that the ritual of the sacred Yam was not completed because of his imprisonment, but Ezeulu demonstrates uncompromising responsibility. John j. Goodcountry, a Christian missionary, takes advantage of this situation while he incites the inhabitants of Umuaro to disobey Ezeulu and starts the harvest immediately under the protection of the white man god. Finally, those who remain faithful to Ezeulu lose their harvest, and extend on them the threat of hunger. As a result of these facts, conversions to Christianity begin regularly, while Ezeulu completely loses favor with its people. Abandoned by all, without any authority, he behaves like a madman unable to discern between being a mortal or the living incarnation of a local deity.

Apart from his many literary virtues, Ezeulu's tragic fate is another testimony of the high anthropological reliability Achebe offers in his narrative. These pages illustrate masterly why Christianity was introduced rather fast in sub-Saharan Africa, and how the internal tensions within the tribal societies were at least as important as the missionaries' performances in this whole process. As Gikandi (1991: 51) remarks, *Arrow of God* is the representation of the struggle for power and authority above all. Ezeulu feels invested on a special authority, as the direct speaker of the divinity. But such authority is being trampled and crushed by the British occupants, who hold the power effectively. Ezeulu's reaction is to strike back another stroke of authority, trying to impose his own will (which he identifies with the will of the divinity) over any other consideration. For this reason, he dares to challenge the natural agricultural cycles. Logically, this situation breaks the laws of common sense, as the respect to these cycles guarantee the subsistence of any settled community. But we must also take into account another issue; a factor the character (Ezeulu) is not aware of, but an aspect the author (Achebe) is aware of, at least in an intuitive manner. The British could exercise a hierarchical and authoritarian power because they are pieces of a more complex mechanism: the structure of a state. Ezeulu attempts to wield an absolute power over his people modeling on the religious leadership without being supported by any sociopolitical structure that, as I have previously stated, is completely alien to the cultural models of the Ibo society. Thus, Ezeulu's attempt is condemned to a failure of tragic consequences, and he pays his mistake with insanity and downfall.

In the complex scenery described in the last chapters the importance of yam should be emphasized once more. Definitely, the sanctification of yam was a direct consequence of its condition of key food in the Ibo diet, and the sacred yam ceremony was born as a means to warrant that human behaviour was adequately adapted to the rhythms and laws of nature. In his irresponsible attempt to submit Umuaro inhabitants under his authority, Ezeulu forgets this essential principle and ends up confusing the aims and values. The priority was the correct measure of months in order to safeguard crops; fitting to the ritual forms ceremony was somehow secondary. Ezeulu's madness begins when he comes to believe that the vital steady firm of the community must be governed by the ritual measurement that he, as a divine mediator, makes of time and not by the passing time. Not only does he cause his own ruin and the one of his faithful followers, but also he has risked the system of beliefs of his own community.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper primarily focuses on two axes, initially of a different nature but rather closely associated. First, it states that the main defining characteristics of the Ibo culture are mainly conditioned by yam as the basis food in their diet. Secondly, it demonstrates that this phenomenon is clearly reflected in the rural novels by the Nigerian Chinua Achebe. This fact gives them unquestionable anthropological reliability, which is undoubtedly one of the main narrative virtues of the writer.

Under these premises, it may be easily analyzed certain passages that, otherwise, would be difficult to interpret from a European viewpoint. In particular, this is especially valuable in the episode of the locusts' plague in *Things Fall Apart*, or in *Arrow of God's* sacred yam ceremony. But the relevance of yam goes beyond. Transcends the specific episodes and becomes a basic element in the social configuration of the communities presented in the settings of the novel. In fact, the circumstance that the agricultural activity is socially more valued than hunting is something that can only be explained if you consider the complexity of the tasks associated with the yam's crop. Eventually, modern anthropology has demonstrated that there is a radical border between cereal and non cereal societies. The Ibo ethnic group is part of the second because yam is a tuber. However, only the societies whose diet is based on a cereal may adopt the socio-political structure of a state. We may affirm that the existence of such a structure acts as a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of symbolical systems of writing. Therefore, it may be concluded that the condition of a yam-based society is what determines that the Ibo adopted as their traditional ways of living a civilization without social classes, stateless and without

writing. This fact should not be taken, at all, as a cultural deficit (which would be falling into an unjustifiable pro-European ethnocentrism). It is simply a proof of the ecological adaptation of the socio-cultural structures of the Ibo people to their natural conditions of survival.

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