

Delay and Justice in the Lore and Literature of Igbo Extraction 1
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What one wins in a title is the privilege of magisterial speech. The privilege of magisterial speech is the highest honour attaching to any title. We expect the first act of a winner to be a speech.

James P. Carse (107).

Time is charged with “significance” for man because human life is lived under the shadow of time, because the question, what am I makes sense only in terms of what I have *become*, that is, in terms of the objective historical facts together with the pattern of significant associations constituting the biography or the identity of the self.

Hans Meyerhoft (127)

Events, deprived of meaning themselves, steal meaning from you. They adapt to the most fantastic hypotheses like natural species and viruses adapt to the most hostile environment.

Baudrillard (171)

1. Introduction

I have selected these preferatory quotations to justify my role as the protagonist of this afternoon's event and to initialize time as both the grounding topoi and focus of my lecture. In the process, I seek to understand what happened to me as a result of the delay in my elevation to Professorship which was announced on December 8, 2006, though effective from October 1, 1996. More than this, I want to explore the ways in which delay has been depicted in the lore and literature of Igbo extraction.

Events and titles come to us that leave us speechless, thus constraining us to silence. Ultimately a reflective speech follows to break this silence, to rationalize it. A professorial inaugural lecture is supposed to be a magisterial one, that is, one spoken *ex cathedra*. Among other things, a professorial title is only a promissory note of making such a speech. For some, this note is never redeemed. For some others, what is redeemed hardly satisfies the yearnings of both those in the wings and those whose intellectual appetites have been excited. Some redemptions that appear generally satisfactory succeed in creating desire. This suggests that a professorial title is a bottomless pond of fresh waters.

For any academic, a professorial title that is deserved gives a sense of self-actualisation. I once overheard two students of this university arguing about the competence of one of their teachers. One of them summarized the discussion by saying that a ripe orange is a ripe orange, no matter how the orange attains to its ripeness. The implications of this statement notwithstanding, the battle for academic ripeness by way of professorial attainment is fought in “the shadow of time”, and of course contributes to “the pattern of significant associations constituting the biography or identity” of the individual professor. The battle may, therefore, affect the nature of the person’s inaugural lecture. The struggle for my promotion to the rank of Professor has, for good or bad, influenced the framing of the title of my inaugural lecture.

This lecture, “Delay and Justice in the Lore and Literature of Igbo Extraction” is, however, not about a professorship delayed for ten or more years. In the same vein, it is neither about the delay in the announcement of my entrance examination result nor is it about the peculiar delay in the receipt of my appointment letter as a Junior Fellow of this university. All that is now history, an inextricable part of my biography and identity formation; but as T. S. Eliot has written, time the destroyer is time the preserver. In which case, the concept, “fullness of time” taken in its primitive sense is naïve, or taken in a theological sense, both complex and paradoxical. We cannot run away from time, and time cannot run away from us. Perhaps, it is our juggling with it that produces notions of timeliness, delay and all that. In this inaugural lecture, I want to use examples from the lore and literature of Igbo extraction to illustrate the manner in which delay has been conceptualized and presented. In the course of the lecture, the ways in which delay connects with justice shall be allowed to speak for itself.

2. Text, Literary Text, and Textuality

Literature as a discipline is about the study of literary texts. A literary text is marked out from other texts because of its assumed *literariness*. A certain quality of a text, its textuality is said to signal this literariness. The lore of a people is said to embody the ‘untheorised’ wisdom and knowledge of a people simply because it is anchored on the beliefs of the people. This section seeks to investigate the concepts: text, textuality, literariness, and literary text.

A text is simply a construct that is autonomous, intentional, and explicable. It is framed as a sign that opens itself to one or more readings. In this thick description of the term, it is both linguistically and sign constituted. In other words, a text as text need not be constituted only by words. Elizabeth Ermarth is quoted as saying that,

We are always deciphering a text:
The Republican Convention, the
intentions of a friend, Hiroshima,
the emergence of mass media,
glasnost, the behaviour of a
relative, the invasion of a country,
the painting of Paul Klee – all are
texts; all are constructs; all are
readable inventions (22).

In this broad view of the text, the University of Nigeria is readily a text. It is an institution constituted by complex and social practices that are readable in multiple senses. Some factors have led to the acceptance of the broad view of the text. First are the issues of modernity. Before the modern times, anything not embodied in words or speech could hardly be accepted as a text. A second factor is the emergence of cultural studies and the movement of postmodernism, especially with its

insistence on decentered subjectivity that is locatable in inter-cultural and multicultural sites. Around these axes, the self anchors and transforms itself in complex and sometimes unpredictable ways. Of course, structuralism and post-structuralism, with their recommendation that the world be understood as a “structure of signs whose significance is constituted by the cultural conventions, codes, and *ideology* that happen to be shared by members of a cultural community” (Abrams, 317), have also contributed to the acceptance of this broad view of the text. In this understanding, William Shakespeare’s famously quoted, “the world is a stage” is both a text and an encoding: the stage as a phenomenon is Shakespeare’s textual reading of the world, but Shakespeare’s encoding of this reading in words is also a text. Thus, in contemporary times, it has become fashionable to accept any sign-constituted phenomenon as a text.

A significant number of scholars have contributed to the consolidation of this broad view of the text. For Benjamin Harsher (54), a text is “not simply a given intersection of relations, ideas, or poetic principles, but an individualized body of language, marked by partial coherence, and reader-dependent. In this sense, a person may be seen as a text.” Joost Smiers (153) includes “images, movements of the body, theatrical dramatizations, colours,” etc., as text. Jopi Nyman (13) regards “social institutions, cities and cultural phenomenon” as textual constructs while Jeffrey Alexander (305) believes that people “must learn to see technology as a discourse, as a sign system that is subject to semiotic constraints.” This is not to say that this broad view of the text is acceptable to all theorists of signs and texts, for as Susan Arndt has said,

With respect to the question of what is to be subsumed under the concept of *text*, however, the view

of poststructuralists diverge: Theorists with a broad understanding of text argue – everything is text. Not merely literary and other fictional and other written works are texts, but also everything which can be thought, thought over, and seen. Other poststructuralist theorists have a narrow understanding of a text. By texts they mean solely literary texts (69).

I happen to sympathise with the broad view of the text to the extent that only everything that is meaningful and autonomous could be seen as a text. This understanding offers a justification for reading the University of Nigeria as a text in some sections of this lecture. It is not only that some of the happenings in this University, especially its promotional practices, generate both anguish and anxiety which call for justification, it is also that Calvin O. Schrag (23) takes the “metaphor of text” to “include the practices of individuals and associations, especially institutions that must seek out new ways of vision, of freeing itself and its subjects – those that serve it.” It is my sincere opinion that the University of Nigeria shall benefit from this profound insight of Schrag for even the new ways of the new visionary administration of the University needs to free “itself and its subjects” from some promotional practices that have become targets of explicative controversy.

2.1 What is a Literary Text?

An unrestrained acceptance of everything as text is problematic because it not only raises the issue of meaningfulness as I have tried to suggest above, but also

because it poses the problem of boundaries. Even in relatedness, differences must be sustained. The issue of boundaries is particularly important in academics where specialization is mandatory. This is why Pierre Bourdieu (viii) insists on a specific type of “separation which is the hidden condition of all academic activity.” A literary text is a specific kind of text. In this lecture, I shall anchor the definition of a literary text on the separation between fiction and nonfiction.

The fundamental characteristic of a literary text is what I call its “fictionhood”, i.e. its belongingness to a fictional world. But the boundary between fiction and nonfiction is not easy to determine. One reason for this lies in the meaning of “boundary” itself. Boundaries, arbitrary as they are, are no more than lines, markers, and limits of ontological entities. Princes Alexandria Auditorium in which this lecture is holding is housed in a building that accommodates part of the Registry, Bursary, Planning Unit, and University of Nigeria Mass Transit Unit. In a sense then, boundaries are human constructs. This, however, does not invalidate the notion of natural boundaries – between hills and valleys, rivers and land, desert and savannah, etc. Because boundaries seem to mean nothing in themselves, they could be said to operate like function words.

The insight one gathers from this conceptualization of boundaries in relation to the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is that a certain heuristics informs us that we are in one and not in the other. In which case, we would want to know the markers that suggest to us that we are in a world of fiction, rather than in that of nonfiction. Both fiction and nonfiction draw from one common pond: the world as we know it. It is supposed that when nonfiction draws from the world as we know it, we expect that what is depicted corresponds with the realities/actualities of the world as we know it. This correspondence is said to constitute one major flank in our

construction of the notion of *truth*. Fiction, on the other hand, has no such aspirations. Instead, it first operates on the world as we know it, plays with and manipulates the world as we know it, presents the ontological given as better or worse than it is in actuality, and deploys the ensuing manipulation and transformation to say things that tell us about the world we are said to know as it is. This is probably why the notions of invention, intentionality, artful representation, imagination, indirection, etc. are all evoked in an important sense in any serious and heightened discussion of fiction.

These factors place fiction in a problematic relationship with truth. Does fiction teach truth, or preach the truth, or represent it? The neo-classical formulation that literature neither affirms nor denies anything does not help matters because if that were true the world would have no business spending human and material resources in the study of literature and promotion of creative writing. It is definitely the suspicion cast on fiction that led Michael Foucault, decidedly an important intellectual figure in the twentieth century, to say, “I am well aware that I have not written anything but fictions; which is not to say that they have nothing to do with the truth” (44). The reason for all this is the long standing attempt by the rationalist and scientific discourses to appropriate truth for themselves. In the process, fiction has been made the Other. Indeed, were fiction to be a territory with unexplored oil wells, it would have been declared an evil axis peopled by Talibans and suicide bombers.

In this lecture, I would want to reformulate the problem differently. The critical issue should be in what way fiction tells the truth, or the way fiction presents the truth. Fiction is a field of study and all fields of study are ways of speaking about the world. The variously adopted ways of speaking about the world enjoy their different discursive legitimacies about truth. If in

mathematics, supposedly the most exact of the sciences, it is true that when you multiply any number by zero, the product is zero, then we are dealing with truth domains. This axiom challenges our major understanding of the meaning of *multiplication*. In our University, we would be battling to understand how twenty-six inaugural lectures multiplied by zero inaugural lecture will give us no inaugural lecture. But that is the mathematical truth, amazingly close to the sharp practices of money doublers that take away all that one has in the promise of multiplying it. And of course there are laboratory truths, i.e., truths you cannot demonstrate unless you are in certain laboratories with specific types of equipment. Talk of light years and innumerable other scientific theories and one can understand why Frederic Jameson worries about short-circuiting objects with “abstract thoughts” (4). Perhaps, this is also the reason that makes Gary Gutting say, “If nothing prevents us from articulating science as a narrative, nothing prevents us from converting fiction into experimental hypotheses, into science *fiction* if the hope for universal reduction or inter-translatability has been dashed” (277). This, indeed, is the crux of the problem: inter-translatability of truth across disciplinary boundaries, or the universalization of the notion of “scientific” truth across disciplines. Academic truth is the story that disciplines tell the way they conceptualise it. We in the literary discipline should no longer shy away from the fact that literature is controvertibly linked with truth.

The literary use of language is one generally accepted feature that marks out literature from other disciplines. This is why language orientation is very important in literary studies. It is usually the figurative use of language that is fingered each time there is a claim about the special place of language in literary construction. Heightened use of language, irony, humour, metaphor, synecdoche, hyperbole, and all that are

usually identified as such specific instances of the literary use of language. One other way in which the special language use theory of literature has been encapsulated is in “the willing suspension of belief,” meaning that when one listens to a piece of literature or fiction, one should deliberately refuse to take for granted what one has heard. In other words, fictional or literary talk should be taken with a pinch of salt. I do not need to waste time telling us that this is the advised attitude with which to deal with the speech of perceived liars. I do not also need to tell you that I do not agree with all this.

Among the Igbo, the commonest type of fiction is *iwhe*, *ifo*, i.e. folk tales. There is hardly any significant use of figurative language in these tales. This applies to anecdotes, myths, and legends. It is only in the use of proverbs that figurative language becomes pronounced. But the problem remains whether proverbs could rightly be called fiction or literature. People who attend village meetings conducted in Igbo know that most of such meetings are characterized by pronounced use of figurative language. I would then not know whether one could call such meetings fiction. Outside the Igbo context, any person who has taught American Literature knows the difficulty students have about accepting “The Declaration of Independence” speech by Jefferson, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King Jr., *Commonsense* by Thomas Paine, etc. as literature. Many books of the *Bible* are treated as fiction, albeit to the consternation of those that are born against such liberties. The special language use theory of literature has, then, no easy resting place.

Finally, it does appear that a “no-shaking” area of defining both fiction and nonfiction is to regard all of them as constructs. What would separate fiction from nonfiction is that it would be called an artistic construct, or a construct characterized by a certain artfulness or creative insights. Such a

purposive constructiveness is definitely made to be enjoyed, entertaining, and all that, but it can only be entertaining or enjoyed because it has meaning. And it has meaning because it says something to us. What it says to us emanates from the experience of the world, and we are put in a position to agree or disagree with what it says to us. If we agree with what it says, then that is the correspondence theory of truth. If what it says makes meaning to us, then that is the coherence theory of truth. If we recognize ourselves, others, or institutions in what it says, then that is the recognition theory of truth. Philosophers should take note of this in case they do not have such. If what it tells us does not happen at the moment of telling, but comes to be several years after the telling, then that is the truth of prophecy. God has used the artist to tell things that would happen, and that is revelation.

All artistic constructs are bearers of stories. But there are also many other phenomena of life that are bearers of stories. Institutions also function in ways in which they become bearers of stories. As Margaret Visser has eloquently showed, even a meal could become an artistic construct. For her,

A meal is an artistic construct, ordering the foodstuffs which comprise it into a complex dramatic whole, as a play organizes actions and words into component parts such as acts, scenes, speeches, dialogues, entrances, and exits, all in the sequence designed for them. However humble it may be, a meal has a definite plot, the intention of which is to intrigue, stimulate, and satisfy (14-15).

To conclude this section, a literary text is also that which intrigues, stimulates, and satisfies the reader or listener. It is a story arranged in parts: a beginning, a middle, and an ending.

3.0 Enyimenyi anyị agbakwūrū n'ụzọ: Ways of Beginning to Approach the Meaning of Delay in Literature

I am from Lejja, generally accepted as the *Onyishi Igbo Omaba* group in Nsukka culture zone. Before the Nigeria-Biafran War, and in the immediate post-war years, Omaba masked spirits used to be accompanied from one village arena to the other in the town. This was for the masked spirits to perform in the arenas and to enable each village to showcase its human and material strengths. The song which begins with *Ndị ka gị mmadụ, he bụ ndị ka gị ma*”, or “*Ndị ka gi ma, he bụ ndị ka gi mmadụ*”, meaning, “those who have more people than you have more spirits” or “those who have more spirits than you have more people” sums up this. During such Omaba festivals, a vanguard group from one village would go ahead, as was the custom, to inform a next village that the masked spirits from their village were on the way. Once in a while, there would be delay in the movement of the masked spirits. In the event of such a delay, the vanguard group would chant a song whose only text is *Enyimenyi anyị agbakwūrū n'ụzọ*, meaning, “our elephant has got stuck on the way.” The elephant as metaphor may refer to a collectivity of all the masked spirits or to one of them. The Igbo generally use the metaphor of the elephant to depict hugeness. Thus, when the Igbo say, *ụwa bụ anyị enyimenyi*, transliterated to “the world is the meat of elephant,” it means that the world is so huge that each person can always cut a piece from it. The implication of the song, *Enyimenyi anyị agbakwūrū n'ụzọ* is that only things and events of phenomenal significance could justify delay. However, even such

phenomenal delays are not sufficient justification for delay that leads to the loss of integrity of persons.

In an article, “*Erem ọnu m*” (2004), I specifically refer to an incident in which a young man from my village tore off the head gear of an Omaba, thereby unmasking it deliberately. Why did this young man do what he did? How did he justify his action? As one of the lead singers in a vanguard that goes ahead to announce the arrival of Omaba masked spirits, this young man had been boasting to another assembled village group that they were about to witness the best and hugest Omaba masked spirit ever. Unfortunately for him, the movement of his village group was hampered by the size of the particular masked spirit that was the subject of his boasting. Finding the movement of the specific Omaba so encumbering, the people leading the Omaba troupe had decided to change the person carrying the mask. When the young man came back in high spirits to spur those leading the Omaba masked spirits to hasten their movement, he was enraged at what he saw. Without a second thought, he tore off the head gear of the new Omaba masked spirit and walked away in annoyance saying, *Erem ọnu m*. In other words, there is no general consensus that things as phenomenal as the elephant could justify delay.

In a monograph titled *Towards a Genealogy of African Time* (2003), in which I condemn the wrongful ascription of the term “African time” to unpunctuality, I have amply depicted incidents that are seen as fatal to Igbo imaginings due to delay. One of these is the Igbo mythological account of the origin of death. As the account has it, the dog and the tortoise were respectively dispatched with messages of immortality and mortality to God. The reckoning was that the fast dog would reach God first with the preferred choice of immortality. Unfortunately, the dog chose to indulge itself in some distractions on the road and by the time it arrived with its

message, the tortoise had already delivered to God the unsavoury message of human choice of death. Because God only accedes to the first message, the dog's message was rejected. This is why human beings die.

Those who have a better account of death are duty bound to make it known. What is interesting here is that a similar aetiological tale in the West concerning the hare and the tortoise is interpreted as a slow-and-steady-wins-the-race phenomenon. The Igbo version of this tale not only privileges the notion of timeliness, but also says something very important about the types of person who could be trusted with fundamentally important messages. What is of great significance is that for the Igbo, delay is seen as the cause of death.

This example of the Igbo origin of death is as traumatic to them as the reason for the withdrawal of God from the human world. The story has it that the Sky was once very close to human beings. Because of this proximity, human beings could interact with *Chukwu*, the Almighty God and a greatly patient being. Unfortunately, there was this woman late cook. Every night when people have had their dinner and gone to sleep, her pounding of food would be heard piercing the still night. In this undying habit of the woman, her pestle would poke the Sky, thereby continually disturbing *Chukwu* in his sleep. The people had long stopped to complain to the husband who had accepted his fate. But *Chukwu* could not bear this forever. A decisive action was needed. *Chukwu* decided to betake both himself and his residence, the Sky, away from human reach. Since that time till the present moment, human beings have lost direct contact with *Chukwu*. Ever since then, they have resorted to diviners and seers and priests to communicate with *Chukwu*. This traumatic event in the Igbo world has been caused by delay, i.e. not doing things at the appropriate time.

If *Chukwu*, the Almighty God, could exhaust his patience, then critics should take a second look at the character of Okonkwo of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo is dominantly perceived as an impatient protagonist. This is said to be most manifest in his beating of his wife during the Week of Peace, an abominable offence against Ani, the Earth deity. As we are told in *Things Fall Apart* (21), "Okonkwo was provoked to a justifiable anger by his youngest wife, who went to plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal." Okonkwo beat his wife not just because she did not cook the afternoon meal, but because of her perceived irresponsibility. After all, his other wives were there. Indeed, Nwoye's mother had to feed Ojiugo's children. She even tells a lie "to minimize Ojiugo's thoughtlessness" (21). It is evident from this that thoughtlessness could cause delay, although the enduring lesson is that no amount of delay should lead one into breaking the injunction of the great Ani, the Igbo Earth deity.

The fact that the experience of delay has proved to be traumatic to the Igbo world makes it not a surprise that there are several Igbo proverbs that decry the phenomenon of things and events not taking place at the appropriate time. The following Igbo proverbs are instructive for the statements they make about delay.

Urūa kwere izu gabu ọnwu.

Sleep that lasts for four days is death.

Agwo here, etia okpiri

Hitting the snake when it has already passed.

Ihe kama na-oge

Things are best at the appropriate time.

Ka abia ka abia na-amu ngana

Wait, wait begets no action.

Eriri a tọrọ afọ, a ga-eji ya ke ala o bu elu?

The string that takes a year to loosen, will it be used in tying the earth or the heavens?

A taunt to those who waste too much time in consultations. (Amadiume, Vol. 3, 6).

Nwankpị sị 'Ka emebe emebe.'

'Action, please', say the he-goat.

This proverb is used in opposing unnecessary delays. (Amadiume, Vol. 3, 78)

Ụkwa rue oge ya o dagi, o na-eche ndị mmuọ ka ha nnuda ya?

If the head of the ripe breadfruit refuses to fall, is it waiting for spirits to bring it down?

Akụ mkpu elekatala anya mmiri fee.

The termites have got tired of waiting for the rains and taken to their wings.

(One cannot wait indefinitely for an event to happen but must take necessary action in lie of it.) (Igwe, 124)

"Nta, nta," anaghị eme eme

"If one goes on saying, 'I shall do it soon, I shall do it soon', a thing never gets done." (Procrastination is the thief of time.)

(Igwe, 137)

Ka abịa ka abịa nara awọ epula odudu.

Wait, wait, prevented the toad from having a tail.

(Ogbalu, 57)

There are many other proverbs which suggest that the phenomenon of delay is not positively inscribed in the Igbo imagination. There are even some which suggest ways of avoiding it. One such is the proverbial wisdom which demands

that people create sufficient time for doing things on time in order to avoid predictable complications. This is the Igbo proverb that instructs people to begin in day time to look for the black cow.

There is also evidence to show that the phenomenon of delay is negatively portrayed in Igbo anecdotes. There is this anecdote about a certain selfish and greedy *Onyishi* – the eldest male in a clan – who did not want not people to benefit from or share in the perquisites of his office. As the *Onyishi* of the community, he was the intermediary between his people and their ancestral spirits, and the people usually brought offerings for him to place before the ancestors. On one particular occasion, a man brought kola nut, food, palm wine, and a cock for presentation to the ancestors. The kola nut and the food were first offered to the ancestors. As he was about to share the chicken, he heard the footsteps of an approaching visitor. In one quick moment, the *Onyishi* took the entire meat and hid in the rafters. But the visitor was near enough to see what the *Onyishi* did. Of course, the people generally knew the character of the *Onyishi*. The visitor decided to stay long with them, not necessarily because of the chicken but to embarrass the *Onyishi*. Unfortunately, the man who brought the items of sacrifice was in a hurry to go. When his patience was exhausted, he asked the *Onyishi* to kindly complete the business so that he could leave. The *Onyishi* was dismayed on hearing this. Not knowing what else to do, and of course being used to all the tricks of the selfish, he took a lobe of kola nut, and with the eye of the kola, said:

*Ezechitoke abịama, gị nwe iye
lile; mee nke dị n'elu mee nke dị
n'ala,*

God the ultimate Creator, you own everything, both the things that are

up and the things that are down,
etc.

The anecdote does not go further to say what happened thereafter, but it illustrates that certain acts of delay occasioned by selfishness could lead to very ludicrous situations.

One more anecdote to complete this section. It is related that there was once an *Atama* (a priest to a deity), who by custom was allowed to eat only yam for seven native weeks during any calendar year. But there was this year which resembles the fictional representation of the drought and excessive rain in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. That year, the planting of yams was delayed, and the excessive rain did not help matters. To worsen a bad case, the *Atama* witnessed enormous family misfortunes that year, the reason for which he could not plant yams in significant quantities. Consequently, when the period of his abstention from other crops came, there were not many yams left in his barn. The great famine which was witnessed that year did not make it any easy for his kinsmen to contribute tubers of yam for him. Five native weeks into the period of abstention from other food items, there were no more yams for him. After two days without food, he called his four wives and said, "Just pound anything you can afford. Thereafter, I will close my eyes and you feed me from it. As long as I do not see what I am eating, I do not know what it is." As it is, delay could also lead to some ingenious false selves.

To conclude this section of the lecture, I have attempted to demonstrate the fact that the Igbo fictive and folkloric imagination has conceptualized delay in several ways. Very broadly, delay could be caused by natural events or by human beings. By whatever way caused, delay is portrayed as an abnormal phenomenon. In other words, delay is not the normal condition of things; it is not in sync with normal human

expectations. It is not all too human, all too natural. This is why it is fatally traumatic in Igbo life and thought. At the same time, it creates laughable situations, dry commentaries on life. As the Igbo say, *Ejigi oku acho efife*, meaning, one does not use light to search for daylight. It is all too evident. But more on the significance and implications of delay later.

4.0 If a Tale is told Without Mention of the Tortoise: Chinua Achebe and the Representation of Delay in Fiction

The year that Okonkwo took eight hundred seed yams from Nwakibie was the worst year in living memory. Nothing happened at its proper time; it was either too early or too late. It seemed as if the world had gone mad. The first rains were late, and, when they came, lasted only a brief moment. The blazing sun returned, more fierce than it had ever been known, and scorched all the green that appeared with the rains. The earth burned like hot coals and roasted all the yams that had been sown. Like all good farmers, Okonkwo had begun to sow with the first rains. He had sown four hundred seed yams when the rains dried up and the heat returned. He watched the sky all day for signs of rain-clouds and lay awake all night. In the

morning, he went back to his farm and saw the withering tendrils... the drought continued for eight market weeks and the yams were killed... That year the harvest was sad, like a funeral, and many farmers wept as they dug up the miserable and rotting yams. One man tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself.

Things Fall Apart (16-17).

This elaborately quoted passage speaks eloquently for itself. This is delay in action. And this is the people's experience of it. For the narrative voice, "It seemed as if the world had gone mad." For Okonkwo, it was a great moment of anguish, anxiety, sleeplessness, and imaginable continued petition to God. For the people, it "was the worst year in living memory"; a year that "was sad, like a funeral." For the unnamed character for whom life had become meaningless so much so that he could find no more reason to live, he "simply tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself." In a popular Igbo adage, it is said that "the thought which kills a man is not a one-day affair." Delay generates a condition of *ennui* and absurdity, and people without a strongly anchored psychological stability behave in abnormal ways. Suicide is not a positive answer in the face of absurdity, not even in the supposed dignity it is supposed to confer on the victim. Even in the Taliban style, it does not elevate the victim to the status of martyrdom.

In both *Arrow of God* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe continues to depict the consequences of things not happening at the appropriate time. The entire tragedy of *Arrow of God* is anchored on the delay in the eating of the sacred yams.

This delay is occasioned by Ezeulu's incarceration by colonial administrators at Okperi. Because of this, Ezeulu is not present at Umuaro to eat the remaining sacred yams which would have enabled him to proclaim the New Yam festival. The importance of sighting the new moon is already underscored in the opening paragraph of the novel:

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 early 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 when the rains came. Then the new moon sometimes hid itself for days behind rain clouds so that when it finally came out it was already half moon. And while it played its game the Chief Priest sat up every evening waiting (1).

Sighting the new moon at the appropriate time is of immense importance because it is the day in which the sacred yams could only be eaten. At every new moon, one sacred yam must be eaten, and the last one to be eaten ushers in the New Yam festival. This is one of Ezeulu's responsibility as the Chief Priest of Ulu. This is such an important responsibility such that Ezeulu, as we are told, "must not take a risk." Even when Ezeulu is at Okperi during one of the new moons, his youngest

son, Nwafor, realizes the importance of the event. Accordingly, we are told in the text that,

As night drew near Nwafor's mind returned to the thought which had been troubling him since yesterday. What would happen to the new moon? He knew his father had been expecting it before he went away. Would it follow him to Okperi or would it wait for his return?... However as dusk came down Nwafor took his position where his father always sat. He did not wait very long before he saw the young thin moon. It looked very thin and reluctant. Nwafor reached for the *ogene* and made to beat it but fear stopped his hand (106).

It is obvious that even a child in Nwafor's circumstances knows the importance of sighting the moon at the appropriate time. Of course, it has to be stated that in lunar calendar system all this is important.

In the process of the development of the novel, Captain Winterbottom decides to make Ezeulu a Warrant Chief. The invitation extended to him in order to obtain his consent is what takes him to Okperi at this most important time in the life of Umuaro. Unfortunately, his invitation to Okperi coincides with the time Captain Winterbottom falls grievously ill. His second in command presents the offer to Ezeulu only after humiliating him by keeping him waiting. Ezeulu's refusal to be any person's chief except that of Ulu provokes the ire of the colonial

administration. Consequently, Ezeulu is ordered to be kept in detention “until he learns to cooperate with the Administration” (177). Ezeulu subsequently remains in detention for thirty-two days during which he is not present at Umuaro to eat two of the sacred yams. This leads to the delay in the proclamation of the New Year festival when Ezeulu returns a free man to Umuaro.

The delay in the declaration of the New Yam festival unleashes a chain of disastrous consequences on Umuaro and her people. The citizens begin to even question the intention of Ezeulu. More than this, they even begin to cast doubts on the nature of Ulu, their central and collective deity. These are illustrated in the following conversation between two characters in the novel, Ofoka and Akuebue:

‘Let me tell you one thing. A priest like Ezeulu leads a god to ruin himself. It has happened before.’

‘Or perhaps a god like Ulu leads a priest to ruin himself’ (213).

This is undoubtedly one of the sinister effects of delay. People begin to suspect one another. People even begin to doubt the nature of deistic intervention in human affairs. Institutional trust is lost. Enmity becomes the portion of the chief protagonists. Sometimes, this antagonism reaches to pariah proportions. We see this in the novel as the people of Umuaro begin to alienate Ezeulu’s household and make mockery of them. In situations of collective social distrust, the beneficiary is often the third party.

It is therefore not surprising that the missionary enterprise in Umuaro is the beneficiary of the ensuing crisis. Under the promptings of Mr Goodcountry, the Catechist, the people of Umuaro begin to take their new yams to the church to

make an offering to God there, thereby acknowledging the power and presence of the new order and at the same time paying obeisance to it. No event in the novel touches Ezeulu so deeply as this one act of transgression by his people. He is even more embittered that his son Oduche fails to inform him about this development. He confronts Oduche with this fact, and Oduche is unable to look his father in the face. This silence prompts Ezeulu to address Oduche in this pitiable manner:

Since you have become dumb let me remind you. I called you as a father calls his son and told you to go and be my eye and ear among these people. I did not send Obika or Edogo; I did not send Nwafor, your mother's son. I called you by name and you came here – in this Obi – and I sent you to see and hear for me. I did not know at that time that I was sending a goat's skull. Go away, go back to your mother's hut. I have no spirit for talking now. When I am ready to talk I shall tell you what I think. Go away and rejoice that your father cannot count on you. I say go away from here, lizard that ruined his mother's funeral (221).

This experience of Ezeulu, traumatizing no doubt, has led to the phenomenon I choose to call the “Oduche complex.” This simply refers to post-colonial subjects who through their immersion in western ideological frames and structures betray their own culture, even without intending to do so. This betrayal

comes about in the process of the dynamic interplay of self, new self, and context. Sometimes, it masks as a form of character objectivification and actualization of the individual's original imaginary. It is a psychological problem in the process of people's adaptation to emerging ideas that impose themselves in an alien environment. But more of this for another essay. Ezeulu's trauma is worsened through a complication of subsequent events in which Ezeulu not only loses his son but also becomes deranged. The people of Umuaro see in this a sign of Ulu having taken sides with them, but the narrative voice in the closing paragraph of the novel feels differently:

If this was so then Ulu had chosen a dangerous time to uphold that truth for in destroying his priest he had also brought disaster on himself, like the lizard in the fable who ruined his mother's funeral by his own hand. For a deity who chose a moment such as this to chastise his priest or abandon him before his enemies was inciting people to take liberties; and Umuaro was just ripe to do so. The Christian harvest which took place a few days after Obika's death saw more people than even Goodcountry could have dreamed. In his extremity many a man sent his son with a yam or two to offer to the new religion and to bring back promised immunity. Thereafter any yam harvested in

the fields was harvested in the
name of the son (230).

A close reading of *Arrow of God* would seem to suggest that the deflection to Christianity by the people of Umuaro is caused by the delay in the announcement of the New Yam festival. In the case of *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's suicide results from the lack of action by the people of Umuofia in support of Okonkwo's killing of the Chief Messenger of the colonial administration. This singular inaction which subsequently leaves the people comatose inspires the title of the District Officer's planned book, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. In the contexts of both *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart*, delay and inaction amount to the same thing. Undoubtedly, inaction where action is needed leads to delay because the desirable state of affairs cannot come to fruition in the absence of action.

It is not only in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* that Chinua Achebe graphically depicts the disastrous consequences of delay. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, a novel that attempts to account for political failure in Africa, at least, as exemplified by Ikem Osodi's assertions, we witness again the devastating effects of delay. Ikem Osodi, the major male protagonist in the novel, realizes, in a flash of imagination, the reason for governmental failure. "The prime failure of this government began also to take on a clearer meaning for him... It is the failure of our rulers to re-establish vital inner links with the poor and dispossessed of this country, with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation's being" (140-141). The delay we encounter in *Anthills of the Savannah* is not a human one. Rather, it is the delay in the arrival of the rainy season. This type of delay is already foreshadowed in *Arrow of God* where we are told,

Although the first rain was overdue, when it came it took people by surprise. Throughout the day the sun had breathed fire as usual and the world had lain prostrate with shock. The birds which sang in the morning were silenced. The air stood in one spot, vibrating with the heat; the trees hung limp (30).

Already we had seen the same portentous effect of delay in the arrival of the rainy season in *Things Fall Apart*.

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, we learn from Chris, a protagonist in the novel, that the citizens of Abazon where the novel is set, “have been slowly steamed into well-done mutton since February” (27). This is because of the intense sun which has continued up to April, supposedly the time for rains. The disaster triggered off by the delay in the rains is more traumatic than anything one can imagine in both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, at least in a collective sense. A summary of the effect of the sun on all the activities in the novel would do considerable damage to the way they are depicted. A few excerpts would give one a very instructive insight into the monumental tragedy occasioned by the delay in the coming of the rains in the novel.

The trees had become hydra-headed bronze statues so ancient that only blunt residual features remained on the faces, like anthills surviving to tell new grasses of the

savannah about last year's brush fires (31).

Household animals were all dead. First the pigs fried in their own fat; and then the sheep and goats and cattle, choked by their own swollen tongues (31).

In the end even the clouds were subdued though they held out longest. Their bedgralled bands rushed their last pathetic resources from place to place in a brave but confused effort to halt the monumental formations of the Sun's incendiary hosts. For this affront the Sun wrecked a terrible vengeance on them cremating their remains to their last plumes and scattering the ashes to the four winds (32).

In the last desperate acts the Earth would now ignite herself and send up a shield of billowing black smoke over her head. It was pitiful and misguided for the heat of the brush fires merely added to the fire of the Sun. and soon, anyhow, there was no fodder left to burn (32).

These are very grim images. In this context, we discover that the sun has become both personified and deified. Consequently, its intense activities and disastrous effect affect both earthly and heavenly (sky) entities. Animate and inanimate entities are all victims. This depiction which is also deployed in a strategic way enables the author to link the havoc caused by the sun with the recklessness and mindlessness of the dictatorial regime under review in the novel. This strategy rises to the status of myth. This is probably why Emmanuel Ngara in his allusion to the use of symbolism and myth in *Anthills* says:

A supreme example of this feature is Ikem's 'Hymn to the Sun' (pp. 28-30) which foreshadows the disaster that follows in the novel and is probably a comment on the self-destructive tactics of His Excellency who, in an attempt to preserve his own power, resorts to destroying his former friends and is himself destroyed in the process (254).

In the "Hymn to the Sun" composed by Chris Osodi and alluded to here by Emmanuel Ngara, we read these lines:

Wide-eyed, insomniac, you go out
at cock-crow spitting malediction
at a beaten, recumbent world.
Your crimson torches fire the
furnaces of heaven and the roaring
holocaust of your vengeance fills
the skies (30).

The enduring lesson that emerges from the depiction of delay in these novels by Chinua Achebe is that the whole creation: human beings, animals, trees, grasses, birds, clouds, and all other objects could suffer irreversible damage if things do not happen at the appropriate time. Human institutions, systems, and natural cycles are also subject to the same negative effects. The unnamed man who hangs himself in *Things Fall Apart*, the capitulation of traditional culture to Christianity in *Arrow of God*, the death of animals and the scorching of the entire environment in *Anthills of the Savannah* are all saddening testimonies to the evil that is delay. To worsen matters, the beneficiary of delay is always the negative Other.

In Achebe's novels, he is primarily concerned with the depiction of delay as it affects society in general, even if individuals are used as vectors and victims of this social malaise. But there are some other writers who use the phenomenon of delay to portray the destinies of individuals. Kate I. Nwankwo in her novel, *Fatal Creed* is concerned with depicting the effect of delay on individuals. In this novel, the author examines a touchy issue in Igbo life: delayed birth or temporary childlessness. The central plot centres around Chika and his wife Ihemma who had been married for fifteen years without a child. Because of this, she is tormented by Ngozi, the jealous wife of the late brother of Chika. Ngozi has a son called Ogbonna, but does not treat him very well. She is very consumed in her unyielding attempt to secure the love of Chika, Ihemma's husband. Many a time Ihemma takes time off her worries to reflect on how a woman would not treat her son kindly, the way Ngozi treats Ogbonna. Once, she attempted to plead with Ngozi to treat Ogbonna more kindly, and she got the shock of her life:

“Don't tell me that” shouted
Ngozi with a venom in her voice.

“When God gives you a child from your long barrenness, you could treat her any way you like, but as for my child nobody should tell me how to treat him, especially people that don’t have children”, Ngozi stated angrily (8).

Ihemma’s plight is not made any easier by Adaku, the sister to her husband. Adaku not only encourages her brother, Chika, to take another wife besides Ihemma, but also confronts Ihemma from time to time, accusing her of bewitching Chika. Ihemma is continually haunted by Adaku’s overt and covert tauntings. In one moment of flashback after she has had a child, she recollects one somber moment of such tauntings:

“Themma, I don’t understand why people should be very selfish, you are aware of the fact that Chika is the only male child of my mother. Why can’t you allow him to marry another wife in order to raise a son that will succeed him. Why are you bent on seeing my brother ruined?” (18-19).

Ihemma had protested in tears and severally asked her husband to marry another wife, but Chika does not want another wife. Adaku found this unbelievable, and had gone ahead to suggest that Ihemma herself should take it upon herself to get a wife for Chika. “If he will not hear of it, get him one and see what happens!” Adaku had actually approached this issue from many

perspectives, including confrontations with Chika. In one such moment, the following discussion took place:

“It is high time you married another woman. You don’t want our lineage to close because you happen to love your wife.”

“Adaku, exercise some patience. You know that God’s time is the best”, Chika pleaded.

“Chika, how dare you sit there foolishly telling me to exercise patience, why? It seems to me that you are no longer a man,” Adaku yelled at her brother. “When is she going to conceive? May be in the next hundred years when you two have rotted in your graves. I never knew you were such a woman wrapper,” she had told her confused brother and strode out slamming the door behind her (19-20).

Both Chika and Ihemma could have been traumatized but for their steadfastness. Chika’s virility is highly challenged, and Ihemma’s fertility is contested. These are troubling issues. For good fifteen years, “God’s time” is their gospel and consolation, an article of faith. When therefore Ihemma learns that she is pregnant, she is so overwhelmed with happiness that she breaks down in joy. It is said that she “broke down and cried so much that people were surprised” (12). In response to her husband’s

query about whether she is not happy about her pregnancy, she says:

“My dear, I am crying for joy, not for sorrow. Don’t you understand the human mind? I think about all these years I’ve been branded barren. Think about the stigma I’ve endured from members of your family, these past fifteen years. Oh God, the compassionate God, when I least expected it, you gave me my bundle of joy, thank you father.” She sang, ‘I thank you Lord, I thank you Lord for your mercies...’ (12).

Ihemma’s reaction is very graphic in the way it depicts what the victim of delay undergoes during the period of the delay: emotional distress.

In *The Games That Dons Play* by Ignatius Omega Nwangwu, we move into an intimate environment: the university system where many a time people created by God take pleasure in using delay in the promotion of their colleagues as an instrument of oppression, suppression, humiliation, and even vilification. But I am quickly reminded that I am speaking on a hallowed ground where before the last few years delay in promotion was a sadistic game played by eminent minds who derived pleasure in playing God. So let us turn to the pages of *The Games That Dons Play*. Two universities are depicted in this novel: the University of Bama, and the University of Ededem. In this novel, delay is wielded as an instrument of terror and suppression. The first victim of delay in the novel is Nkechi, a female undergraduate. She had been unjustifiably

failed in a course and she had applied for her scripts to be remarked. Unfortunately, this was not to be because her application was deliberately delayed for more than twenty-one days, the time horizon during which such an application must be made. Her Head of Department hid the letter and misled Nkechi into believing that the letter had been forwarded to the Registrar. The Registrar denied receiving any such letter and sent Nkechi back to the Head of Department.

By the time Nkechi went back to the Head of Department, he had gone out of his office. She was going to his office every day to report to him that the Registrar did not receive her application but he never showed up in the office again. The day he showed up in his office was two days after the mandatory twenty-one days had elapsed. What Nkechi did not know was that the Head of Department, working in tandem with Dr Okonta, had kept her application in his drawer until the mandatory twenty-one days elapsed. She did not also know that the Head of Department had not yet forgiven her for turning down his request to travel with him when he was going to the University of Ededem as an external examiner. All these explained why Nkechi was going

back to the Campus to repeat Dr Okonta's course (5).

This is not Dr Okonta's first act of sexual harassment. The second case proves a disastrous outing for him. He had deliberately marked down the assignment of Oby Amunabo so that she would fail his course. When Oby wants to find out why she is treated in such a manner, the following dialogue ensues between the two of them, with Dr Okonta insisting that Oby cooperates with him:

"Sir, I don't understand this your cooperation," Oby said.

"You will understand when others have graduated and you are left behind. Then you will know how humiliating it is," Dr Okonta said.

There was silence in the room. Oby's brain was vibrating. She was thinking of how to handle the situation. Her heart was beating faster than she had ever experienced in life.

"Do you want to 'cooperate'? You either 'cooperate' and graduate or refuse to 'cooperate' and be a professional student," Dr Okonta said while laughing (82).

Having failed in her bid to persuade Dr Okonta to score her assignment appropriately, she now carries the complaint to her father who ensures that Dr Okonta is caught and made to suffer for deploying sexual harassment as an instrument of delay and

humiliation. Dr Okonta is caught in a hotel where it had been arranged for Oby to ‘cooperate’ with him.

The other cases of delay in the novel concern the delayed promotion of Drs. Amaigbo and Ogbodo to professorial positions. In the case of Dr Amaigbo, he is assured by his Dean that his papers have been sent out for external assessment. Consequently, “he is full of expectation year-in-year out” (58) that his promotion would soon be announced. It is not until Professor Omeke goes on sabbatical leave that he discovers the cause of delay in the return of Dr Amaigbo’s assessment report. As the author puts it:

When Professor Omeke arrived at the university [Hillview University in the United States], he was assigned to an office which was hitherto occupied by Professor Smith. Professor Smith had died six years earlier. By the time Professor Omeke was going through what was left in the office, he stumbled on Dr Amaigbo’s papers which were sent to Professor Smith after his death (58).

Through a careful and cautious further probing, Professor Omeke discovers that Dr Amaigbo’s papers were deliberately sent for assessment to a dead person. The Dean of the Faculty, Professor Emenike, had nominated a dead person on purpose. Professor Emenike had earlier delayed the promotion of Dr Ogbodo. The proof that Professor Emenike deliberately delayed Dr Amaigbo’s promotion lies in the fact that he himself had done a condolence letter on the death of Professor Smith, and

yet went ahead to forward Dr Amaigbo's papers to the same person. When Dr Amaigbo discovers all this, he is angered. He confronts Professor Emenike with the facts:

“Well, Dr Amaigbo,” Professor Emenike started, “I don't actually know what has happened. I think there is a mix-up somewhere. That will be corrected,” Professor Emenike said with a trembling voice.

“Professor Emenike, you are mean,” Dr Amaigbo thundered. “You are a sadist, you are a criminal of growing influence. In fact your hatred for people's success could be compared with King Herod's hatred towards the first born,” Dr Amaigbo was shouting at the top of his voice so much so that it attracted the attention of many lecturers to the Dean's office (59).

It is not only in the fictional University of Bama that promotions are delayed. Another fictional university, MONN University, which easily stands for the University of Nigeria, is another theatre of delay in promotions. The cases of delay which Inno Uzoma Nwadike documents in his novel, *Uwa Bu Agha* come within the context of the protracted case of nine professors. In this novel, we witness a phenomenon of self-inflicted delay in the person of Dkt Nworisha, a seasoned writer of petitions, who refuses to submit his papers for promotion

because of his sour relations with the incumbent Vice-Chancellor. In the words of the author:

Dkt Nworisha, n'iji megbute Vii Sii, aju juwaa isi itinye akwukwo maka mbuli n'okwa profeso. O n'uru iyi na ya agaghị etinye akwukwo ruo mgbe Odili puru n'ochichi (55).

The Vice-Chancellor of the University of MONN is embroiled in an embittered struggle with nine professors, a situation that leads to the polarization of persons and interests in the university. This crisis prevents many people from being promoted at the appropriate time. As it is related in the novel:

O buru na mmadu na-adonyere Vii Sii ukwu ma onyeisi ya anoro na nke Prof. Iteghete, onye ahụ chefu o ihe obula metutara mbili n'okwa. Onye di etua tinye akwukwo achiri ya ghanye n'ikpoahija. N'aka nke ozo, onye soro na ndi na-efe Vii Sii aka n'ihu, ya chefu o maka promoshon ya n'ihu na aha onye ahụ agaghị eru A&P, nke Vii Sii no n'isi ya aka (60).

If one were a supporter of the Vice Chancellor and his Head of Department was not among the Nine Professors, the person had

better forget anything about promotion. If a person in this situation submitted papers for appraisal, the papers were thrown away into the dustbin. On the other hand, if one was not among those who support the Vice Chancellor, it was better for the person to forget everything about his promotion because his papers would never reach the A&P, of which the Vice-Chancellor is Chairman

(my translation).

A victim in this crisis is Dkt Nwizu. His promotion was delayed for more than ten years. This led to frustration on his part. As a result, he resigned his appointment with MONN University and took appointment in another university where he was made a Professor. The major reason for the delay in his promotion is that he is “Pro V.C.”, and therefore anti “nine professors”. As the story is depicted in the novel:

Akuko koro na ndi dika prof. Nwizu, onye buuru “Pro Vii Sii”, dika esi ekwu ya na bekee, ka ndi otu profeso Teghete ekeghi na a ga-eme ya profeso ka oruchara afo iri Odili jiri puo. N’obi nkolopu, Dkt Nwizu, onye jiri okwa sinio lekchora ihe kariji afo iri abuo, ejiri iwe puo, gawa Mahadum Otammiri ebe e mere ya profeso

site n'akwukwọ achomọrụ nkiti o
tinyere n'egbughi oge. Uwa bu
agha. Onye mara ebe a ga-anọ
aluta ya ihe? (62).

*It is related that members of the
nine professors were not prepared
to allow people like Prof. Nwizu
who were identified as pro-Vice-
Chancellor to be promoted to the
rank of Professor ten years after
Odili's exit. Disheartened, Dr
Nwizu who had been senior
lecturer for more than twenty
years, left in anger and went to an
overseas university where he was
quickly made a professor based on
the papers he submitted along
with his application. The world is
an arena of struggle. Who knows
from what vantage point the
struggle may be won?*

(my translation).

4.1 “Onye Ji Ihe Nwata”: Personal and Philosophic Reminiscences Towards a Conclusion

In 1976 when I was appointed a Junior Fellow in the Department of English, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, my appointment letter was delayed for reasons I have not known to date. But I recall two things that offered me consolation. First, my then Head of Department went ahead to assign an office to me and added: “Sit down and do your work, when they finish

playing with your letter, they would bring it.” The second point of consolation came from friends, relations, and people sympathetic to my progress. They offered me consolation by citing the Igbo proverb: *Onye ji ihe nwata welie aka elu, aka jie ya, nwata ewelu ihe ya*, meaning: When someone raises up what belongs to the child beyond his reach, the child would reclaim his property when the person is tired. Regarding the first point of consolation, those who delayed my appointment letter never tired of “playing with” it; instead, when Professor Obiechina observed that I was getting obsessively worried, he went chasing after the letter, and by the grace of God succeeded in securing it for me after the original was declared lost in transit. At least so I was told. For the second point of consolation, I never had the intellectual time and leisure to reflect on it, not until the sad chapter in the delay in my promotion to professorship began to whirl back the echoes of this normalization proverb in an incessant and insistent manner.

Before my junior fellowship saga, there was a delay in my life that affected me in a deep emotional sense. In 1963, I was the only pupil in Standard Five in my school, St. James Primary School, Aku, who sat for entrance to the then famous St. Teresa’s College, Nsukka. Eight others in Standard Six participated in that examination. Only two of us, Mellitus Manu, now an electrical engineer and myself were successful. I still do not know why the Headmaster who was also my class teacher at that time decided to first inform Mellitus Manu that he was successful. Soon enough, there was widespread rejoicing that Mellitus Manu has passed the entrance examination to STC, a big event and very newsworthy phenomenon at that time. It was not long before I started hearing mocking whispers that I though I was very brilliant to pass the entrance examination to STC from Standard Five. I quietly sneaked out of the class and headed home to the Teachers’ Quarters where I was living with

my brother. As I was about turning the fence which marked the entry to the Quarters, a classmate of mine caught up with me and told me that our teacher had asked him to go and call me. By the time I came back to the class, tears were dripping from my eyes. Amidst the tears, I was informed that I was successful in the said examination. This delay did not last more than thirty minutes, but it brought down tears in a poor boy's face. Here, I have to acknowledge the fact that before I left for St. Teresa's College, this same teacher invited me to his house, summoned a boy, probably his son, and asked him to look at me, a small young boy, going to attend St. Teresa's College. Thereafter, the teacher gave me four long notebooks in the presence of this much bigger and older boy.

When through the corrective intervention of Professor Chinedu Nebo's administration I was promoted to professorship in December 8, 2006, and it was backdated to 1996, and I had been Senior Lecturer for nineteen years, coupled with the fact that my return to my Department from the School of General Studies saw the assignment of courses for me to teach delayed for six years, I could not shed tears, even if I had wanted to. Already, the innumerable bouts of "*akwa obi*" had drained such tears from my lachrymal duct. During this trying period, I was incessantly bombarded with the Igbo proverb, "*Onye ji ihe nwata...*" Although I never tired of wondering about why someone should appropriate what belongs to me and place it before my reach, I have since had time to reflect on the proverb, and I want to draw my concluding remarks from a reflection on it.

I want then to start my reflection on this proverb by posing some questions: given the emphasis the Igbo place on children, could the Igbo have deployed the frame of the child as a vehicle for conveying injustice, denial, and oppression? Is this proverb a petitional prayer of the weak? Did this proverb originate from

the playful act of temporarily dispossessing a child of the thing that belongs to him in order to test his potential generosity? Or was there indeed a critical time in Igbo history when social denial became so pervasive as to give rise to this questionable consolation philosophy? How indeed could one arrive at an appropriate meaning of this proverb? Most importantly, how can this proverb not be misused as an instrument for justifying injustice? These are questions we must individually attempt to provide the answers.

In my personal reflection on the issue, I have attempted to link the proverb with the problematic theological notion of “the fullness of time.” Problematic because it may not easily translate to the Igbo notion of *Ukwa rue oge ya o daa*. This is so because this Igbo approximation to the fullness of time is a seasonal and predictable natural time. In the biblical echo of this proverb, there is time for everything. Our limitations as human beings constrain us to the understanding of only human time horizons – be they calendrical time, mechanical time, or laboratory time. We tend to apprehend God’s time *post factum* and by way of recognition, not through a cognizing process. “The fullness of time” in my modest understanding is meaningful to the extent that it is absolute time, and therefore God’s time. Contrariwise, “the fullness of time” could be said to be both a personified and deified one such that after waiting for its arrival and it does not, human beings begin to approach it with prayer, ritual, and sacrifice. But there is a snag here: let human beings not reconfigure and misconstrue human time – a humanly manageable phenomenon – into God’s time or the logically inexplicable “fullness of time.”

Relating this to the Igbo proverb, *Onye ji ihe nwata*, one is aware that it may not take stretching the imagination to know that one may never get tired of appropriating what belongs to a child, a situation in which some people may decide to play Devil

and convert human time to God's time or ungraspable fullness of time. But how true is this proverb about *Onye ji ihe nwata* in the Igbo ontology of the child and marriage institution? Childlessness and its accompanying agony is a familiar theme in literature. Indeed, the child is so fundamental and important in Igbo marriage institution, so much so that an Igbo proverb has it that *Ihe ana alurū nwanyị bụ maka nwa*. Again, there is the Igbo adage which says: *Nwa bụ nwa ọha*, entrusting as it were, the care of the child on all. Igbo folk tales are replete with instances of the maltreated orphan child who ultimately succeeds to the chagrin of the oppressors. In all such tales, the moral is that the orphan child should not be maltreated. In a metaphysical sense, the child is a sacred entity in the Igbo imagination, and in spite of the fact that husband and wife must sleep together before pregnancy can occur, the Igbo still affirm that *onwero onye mara ebe nwa si abịa*. Given all this, is it probable that the Igbo could frame the philosophy of denial and injustice around the trope of the child?

How then does one interpret this proverb of *onye ji ihe nwata*? The first possibility is that it incarnates an ideology of the oppressed, in a certain sense like the phenomenon of God's time. The inherent powerlessness of the child constrains the child from fighting back to reclaim what belongs to him or her. In the manner in which we have to wait for God's time, the proverb enjoins the child to wait passively and prayerfully till the oppressor is tired of oppressing him or her. In other words, what is envisaged in this ideological reading of the proverb is that any person oppressed should bear it patiently and cross-like until the oppressor is satiated with his oppressive antics. In which case we are face to face with a fatal creed. It could then be argued that this proverb is at work to normalize injustice. As is well known, the principle of normalization works by familiarization of the alien, the strange, the wrongful act, the

unjust act, and this so much so that what is ordinarily unsavoury gradually imposes itself as a norm. Normalization tends to eliminate the principle of shock and abhorrence. The odious then ceases to repel.

I have a suspicion that this proverb is not ancient Igbo thinking. Not that there was no great injustice, but that ancient and authentic Igbo thought would not deploy the trope of the child for the framing of injustice. The evidence I have for affirming that this proverb about *onye ji ihe nwata* is not originally Igbo is speculative and derives from an analogy of what has been happening to another Igbo proverb: *Egbe bere Ugo bere, nke siri ibe ya ebene, nku kpọ ya*. The oppressive class does not appear to be comfortable with this proverb. Consequently, there have been accretions to it which serve no other purpose than to normalize the arbitrary and dictatorial use of power. In the original phrasing of this proverb, it is mandatory that both the kite and the eagle should allow each other a perching space, their differential powers notwithstanding. Indeed, the enshrined principle of accommodation is not negotiable; it is an absolute imperative, and sanctionable should what it posits fail to be. Thus, there is a posited curse on the offender; let its wings break. Any bird whose wings break loses its bird-hood, its essential state of being. But witness what has happened to this proverb in recent times. First, it is reframed as: *Egbe bere, Ugo bere, nke siri ibe ya ebena gosi ya ebe o ga ebe*. In this rephrasing, the sanction has been removed and power of allocation and dispensation given to the stronger one. But the essence of the sanction is to prevent the stronger one from appropriating and concentrating power on itself. It is highly improbable that the strong ensconced in its vantage point would assign another equally vantage point to the weak. Those propagating the change in the proverb know that this cannot be true. But they equally know

that the weak would be unhappy with his new lot and may invent a scheme to inflict vengeance on the strong. It is the recognition of this possibility that has led to a further modification of the proverb to: *Egbe bere, Ugo bere; nke siri ibe ya ebena gosi ya ebe o ga ebe, kama obekwara, ya atana nke ozọ mgbashị*. The process of normalization of injustice is now complete. The weak should accept its assigned place and not do anything that would change its position or inflict injury on the strong one. Paulo Freire would call this the pedagogy of the oppressed.

At whatever level one reads the Igbo proverb about *onye ji ihe nwata*, one finds oppression, injustice, and passivity in the face of injustice. The consolation it purports to offer is an endorsement of the continuity of the hurtful situation. It is like Pilate washing his hand, and refusing to act when he should. Telling a woman who has been pregnant for more than ten months, for instance, to wait for God's time is no consolation. Telling a woman who has been childless for fifteen years of married life to wait for God's time or for the fullness of time is to incapacitate her, but it is also to offer a supposed reprieve from temporary emotional distress. Consoling someone whose promotion has been delayed for more than ten years with the proverb of *onye ji ihe nwata* does not rectify the abnormal situation. In this University, there have been instances of where the *nwata* died while the people who hung his promotion beyond his reach were getting more energetic to sustain their petty game. We must abhor fatalism as a creed, no matter in what religious or secular garb it comes.

Ladies and gentlemen, *ihe ruru nwata diri nwata*. *Onye ewenikwana ihe nwata n'enu ozọ*. For those of us whose property was for too long raised beyond their reach, let me remind them of the comforting words of a character in Ben Okri's *Starbook*:

The minute people are unjust to you they have already lost the fight. The moment they attack you they have lost the war. The moment they try to hurt you, to humiliate you, to invalidate you, that moment they have lost the truth. They have lost all protection. That moment they surrender all their power and authority to you, and they do not know it. Their end is certain. Their defeat becomes inevitable. The rest is time's doing. So carry on your business, be serene, follow your conscience, and have no fear. The laws that operate in the world are invisible laws, and they are greater than the force and powers of men and women. On these laws you depend (219).

More importantly, a character in Myriam Warner-Vieyra's novel, *As the Sorcerer Said*, has this fine proverbial statement, "The river does not wash away what is meant for you." Yes indeed, but let the river not threaten one's property. Let the river follow its path. It is not the custodian of people's properties. What belongs to a person has value which is time governed.

Let time-keepers and gate-keepers not manipulate time and wield it as an instrument of oppression, denial, person invalidation, and humiliation. Delay is hurtful, and many a time traumatic in an irreversible manner.

Thank you.

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