

Arrow of God and the Problem of Time

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Abstract

Temporality is recorded at two levels in *Arrow of God*. These are: conventional and natural times. Conventionally, the novel is set in the colonial period of African (Nigerian) history. Within this context, we have events taking place at various times of the day. Naturally, the coming and going of moons and the coming and going of planting and harvesting seasons signify another level of time-record in the text. Thus, the occurrence of natural cycles/seasons is a point for recording time in the novel. This paper explores the correlation of the eating of the sacred yams and the time of declaring the New Yam festival. Adopting the hermeneutic method and relying on textual analysis, this paper seeks to show that the action of Ezeulu presents a dimension to time that stands against the western conception of time and which can be truly described as an African perspective to time.

Keywords: Ezeulu, New Yam Festival, Setting, Time

Introduction

Time is often considered under setting as a feature of literature. For Bonn, setting is 'the time, place and culture in which the action of a narrative takes place' (153). The setting is also characterized of

various elements like 'geographic location, characters' physical and mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes or the historical time in which the action takes place' (Bonn 153). Temporality is recorded at two levels in *Arrow of God*, namely conventional and natural times. Conventionally, the novel is set in the colonial period of African (Nigerian) history and events also take place at various times of the day. Naturally, the coming and going of moons and the coming and going of planting and harvesting seasons signify another level of time-record in the text. Thus, the occurrence of natural cycles/seasons is a point for recording time in the novel.

The time problem sets in when Ezeulu refuses to declare the New Yam festival because all the sacred yams have not yet been consumed. This act of Ezeulu sets the entire Umuaro at a crossroads and creates a situation that the Christians eventually exploit to their advantage. Within the context of this furor generated by Ezeulu's action, this piece seeks to explore the significance of the yam consumption to the time of declaring the New Yam festival. The question here is: is it the consuming of the yams that validates and marks the time of the New Yam festival; or is it the time of the festival, as dictated by nature, which gives meaning to the consuming of the yams? Adopting the hermeneutic method and relying on textual analysis, this paper seeks to show that the action of Ezeulu presents a dimension to time that stands against the western conception of time and which can be truly described as an African perspective to time.

Plot Synopsis and Setting the Problematic

The full story line of the text is organized in two directions. One is the bid by the colonial government to organise its administration in the Southern part of Nigeria. The other is the description of how the natives of the same region were going about the administration of their lives and communities/clans in the traditional manner. The novel is set in Umuaro and the story opens with the sighting of the

new moon and Ezeulu's beating of the *ogene* and the greeting of the new moon: *onwa atuo!... onwa atuo!... onwa atuo!...* and the prayer of some of the women to the new moon, 'may your face meeting mine bring good fortune' (*Arrow of God* 292). Ezeulu is the custodian of the tradition of the land which comprises six villages. Part of Ezeulu's duties is to watch out for the moon and to count as it comes out and to ensure that the time for the New Yam festival is observed when due. Constitutive of the ritual for this counting is the consumption of the sacred yams designated for the purpose.

On the other hand, we see the colonial agents in Okperi contemplating how to entrench the system of indirect rule in the Southern part of Nigeria as demanded by Lieutenant Governor in a memorandum sent to them. Captain T.K. Winterbottom in a conversation with Mr. Clarke declares that despite his dislike for the policy he has no option. He tells Clarke that he has decided to appoint Ezeulu as the Paramount Chief on the grounds that, 'I have gone through the records...and found that the man's title is Eze Ulu. The prefix *eze* in Ibo means king. So the man is a kind of king-priest' (394). For this reason, they suppose that the new appointment will not be altogether strange to him. With this plan in place, Ezeulu is sent for and the appointment was conveyed to him. His answer is, 'tell the white man Ezeulu will not be anybody's chief except Ulu' (459). This shocks the colonial regent, but earns for Ezeulu more respect and reputation among his people. He is however detained for about three moons over all this during which the scared yams are not consumed and moons phase in and out with no one taking count. This ultimately brings about a clash between *chronos* and *kairos* as modes of time reckoning.

***Kairos* and *Chronos* in the Umaro Predicament**

These concepts of time are alluded to by Onyeocha as the two perspectives to time within the Greek context. He makes reference to these concepts in order to elucidate the African perspective to

time (Onyeocha 31). But Onyeocha's discourse has a broader context and an adequate understanding of his discourse and its place in the current engagement demands exploration of this context. Scholarly discussions of the African perspective on time revolves around the tardiness school on the one hand and those who hold that the African conceptualization of time is far more complex than the tardiness school of thought will have us believe. The tardiness school insists that the average African is not time conscious and this has negative consequences on African development. In this school of thought, we have Peter Bodunrin's distinction between the sciento-technical and religio-mythical rationalities and their different understandings of time.

For Bodunrin, it is the sciento-technical epistemological attitude that is prevalent in western societies. This epistemic attitude notwithstanding its humanism, naturalism and fallibilism also has efficiency and efficacy as basic orientations. By this, time must be mechanically managed. Time operates in this framework within the ambient of 'purposive rational action' as different from 'an interactive system' (Bodunrin 38). What this suggests in concrete terms is that we must follow time as it is. On the other hand, there is the religio-mythical outlook to the world. This is a world view in which there is acceptance of argument of authority and tradition; the acceptance of paranormal modes of cognition; an ethos that seeks to defend dogma; and entities and spirits flying in space around the world (37). This suggests also an interactive attitude to the world and time. This means that, 'when a meeting starts is not important as to make sure as much as possible everybody is present. The international culture governing air travels requires planes to take off and land on schedule, the traditional values of the African require that we get everybody on board, and if it is necessary to delay departure, this is done...' (41). It appears then that keeping time to the minute is not the focus of the African. The attitude is to carry everybody along rather than ensure efficacy

or efficiency. Bodunrin concludes that 'the importance of the matter in the present context is this: sciento-technical progress is not possible on a religio-mythical assumption of the world' (38). Africa must therefore key into the sciento-technical epistemic attitude in order to progress sciento-technically.

Similarly, Nyasani makes a distinction between perceptual and metaphysical times. In his estimation, progress and development are consequences of managing time appropriately. For him,

to exercise managing of time effectively and advantageously must involve the relative control, domination, regulation and the conscious surrender to the fact of time, since neither absolute regulation nor domination is possible, at least on a metaphysical plane, because time *qua* time is an *a priori* category or form of the mind as it grapples with disparate sense intuitions. This means that the time we are envisaging here is not the metaphysical time, but rather that perceptual time that underscores all physical events and occurrences (87).

The appropriate mobilization of the positive factors inherent in this perceptual time demands responsibility, self-discipline, time-management and time-exploitation. Africans are said to lack these virtues and hence the slow pace of development on the African continent. Consequently, to move on, Africa needs to re-examine its mental attitude towards these factors and key into the manipulative understanding of time so as to harness the benefits inherent in such an attitude for optimum development. This also reaffirms the point that tardiness is a defining quality of the African conception of time which has to change for Africa to grow.

On the other hand, there are those who believe that the African conception of time is far more complex than the simplistic understanding proposed by the advocates of tardiness. In their estimation, a comprehensive appraisal of the African conception of time shows it has qualities which the Western conception does not appreciate but which are fundamental to a comprehensive

understanding of time in general. This impression is gleaned from the understanding of time within the African context that is presented by scholars within this school of thought. Mbiti actually inaugurates the discussion in this regard. In his estimation, the traditional African concept of time is 'a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long *past*, a *present* and virtually no *future*' (16). The reason he gives for this is that,

Time has to be experienced in order to make sense or to become real. . . . Since what is the future has not been experienced, it does not make sense; it cannot, therefore, constitute part of time, and people do not know how to think about it—unless, of course, it is something which falls within the rhythm of natural phenomena (17).

Following this, Kalumba and Parker concluded that there are two reasons why Mbiti regards traditional Africans as having a two-dimensional concept of time. First, time must be experienced to become real for these people. Second, only the past and the present have been experienced by anyone (Parker 54). The fact of having to be experienced before time can become real also suggests that time within the African context is often tied around events. These events constitute the basis upon which the experience of time is located.

The two basic elements of the African conception of time (no concept of the future and time as event bound) so elucidated by Mbiti are also further corroborated by other scholars within African scholarship. On the idea of Africans lacking a coherent idea about the future and focusing on the past, there is Pennington's idea of soul/ego-extension and how this affects the conceptualization of time. For him, the dynamics of soul and ego-extension goes a long way to show the concept of history and time within which a culture works. In his opinion, 'the philosophy of the soul and ego-extension determines the attitudes of a culture in terms of its having a past, present, or futuristic orientation. Those with a futuristic ego-extension tend to emphasize youth and planning for an abstract

'tomorrow,' thus reckoning time in isolation from other events. On the other hand, those whose egos extend into the past for a sense of completion emphasize the importance of the ancestors or those of the past who are believed to give meaning to one's present existence' (125). Given the dependence of the African cosmological network on the ancestors, its soul and ego-extension are to the past. For this reason there is no emphasis on the future and hence an affirmation of Mibiti's case that there is virtually no temporal conception of the future among traditional Africans.

On other hand, Onyeocha's idea of epochal time corroborates the event-bound nature of the African conception of time. In his opinion, 'an African conception of time is epochal for the fact that it almost invariably is wrapped around events or activities' (30). Babalola and Alokun concretize this better in our opinion when they give examples of time recording in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*:

In page 11, [Achebe] wrote that during the planting season, Okonkwo worked daily on his farm from *cock crow until chicken went to roost*. In page 19, he wrote that 'the drought continues for *eight market weeks*...' In page 22, he wrote that Ikemefuna was ill for *three market weeks*. Again, in page 23, he wrote that Ikemefuna came to Umofia at the end of the *care free season, between harvest and planting*. He also wrote in page 27 that, 'yam, the king of crops, was a very exacting king. For three or four moons, it demanded hard work and constant attention from cockcrow till the chicken went back to roost' (143).

The specificity of time as recorded in the above is tied to events. Thus, rather than reckon time in the abstract form as it is done in the West, it is hinged on events to make it real and concrete. This then is a distinguishing feature of the African conception of time.

It is also within the context of the discourse on epochal time that Onyeocha makes reference to the Greek concepts of *kairos* and *chronos*. In his estimation, 'chronological time is the before and the after as measured by clocks and calendars; it is always linear,

orderly, quantifiable and mechanical. *Kairotic* time is the before and after that is organic, rhythmic, bodily, leisurely and aperiodic. It is the inner cadence that brings fruit to ripeness, woman to birth, man to change his direction in life at the right moment Africans generally have a *kairotic* attitude to time. This *kairotic* attitude could explain the seeming serenity and lack of fuss on the part of African and some other traditional cultures about 'keeping mathematical time,' i.e., being tied to an abstract linear time frame...' (31-32).

It is our opinion that the time conflict in *Arrow of God* is between the chronological and *kairotic* conceptions of time. Both conceptions of time are operative in Umuaro. The chronological idea of time is reflected in the coming and going of natural seasons which is also part of the linear concept of time. Though this coming and going of seasons is a cyclic phenomenon, it envisions a cycle that moves on in a linear direction since the seasons do not repeat themselves and unrepeatability is a feature of linear time recording. The nuances of each season are unique to it, suggesting that there is a linear flow of the motion of time. Secondly, this feature of unrepeatability is what accounts for time loss and this is a strong implication/feature of the linear concept of time. Time within the seasonal purview can as well be lost. For a planting season not properly put to use cannot be reclaimed. Hence, the need to use seasons appropriately. On the other hand, the *kairotic* concept of time is reflected in the consumption of the sacred yams. Here, the event of the complete consumption of the yams determines when the New Yam festival is to take place. For this reason, Ezeulu refuses to declare the festival/harvest since the yams have not been consumed. The clash is therefore reflected in the fact that chronologically, the time of the New Yam festival has come. But *kairotically*, it is not yet time, since the sacred yams have not been fully finished.

Arrow of God: An Instance of the African Perspective to Time

From the foregoing, it is clear that it is the consumption of the sacred yams that determines the time for the New Yam festival and not the arrival of the natural period of the harvesting season. As an answer to the motivating question for this paper, it is the event of the complete consumption of the yams that marks the time for the declaration of the New Yam festival. As such, it is the consumption of the yams that gives meaning to the time for the declaration of the festival. This claim is further validated by the triumph of Ezeulu's position. One may think that Ezeulu was wantonly wrong in not declaring the festival as at when due and that is why he and the community are punished. Ezeulu loses his son and the yams that were to be used for the festival are diverted to the church. The contention that Ezeulu's perspective triumphed does not ignore these facts. Rather, what actually validates the case for the triumph of Ezeulu resides first in the readiness of the elders of Umuaro to take responsibility for whatever happens if Ezeulu goes ahead to declare the festival even when the sacred yams have not been consumed. The words of Anichebe Udeozo to Ezeulu are quite apt in this regard,

...listen to what I am going to say. Umuaro is now asking you to go and eat those remaining yams today and name the day of the next harvest. Do you hear me well? I said go and eat those yams today, not tomorrow; and if Ulu says we have committed an abomination let it be on the heads of the ten of us here. You will be free because we have set you to it, and the person who sets a child to catch a shrew should also find him water to wash the odour from his hand. We shall find you the water. Umuaro, have I spoken well? (Achebe 492).

There is unanimous approval from all those present at the gathering. It is a gathering of ten key elders from the community that had come to appeal to Ezeulu to jettison the sacred mandate and go ahead with the declaration of the festival. But there are fear

consequences of Ezeulu doing as bid. They know it is wrong, but they cite expediency. For them, pledging their heads is enough to overcome the foreseen consequences. This fear is clear indication that Ezeulu is not off the track.

Secondly, with Ezeulu's insistence that the sacred mandate be held to the letter, one imagines that the elders would all willingly submit to the demands of the Christians 'that anyone who did not want to wait and see his harvest ruined could take his offering to the god of the Christians who claimed to have the power of protection from the anger of Ulu' (499). Achebe continues that such a story would have caused laughter among the people at another time, but there is no more laughter left in the people. Despite this, the elders understand that to dare Ulu is not something to do lightly. Rather than submit to the rational demands of the god of the Christians and bring their yams confidently and go ahead with their harvest so that their families may not starve, they send their children instead to the thanksgiving. As Achebe puts it, '...many a man sent his son with a yam or two to offer to the new religion and to bring back the promised immunity. Thereafter any yam harvested in his fields was harvested in the name of his son' (513). As against the widespread belief that Obika's death is a sign that 'their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest' (512), they still could not confidently follow the new path set before them. This hesitancy by the elders shows that Ezeulu had made a point which is clearly understood by them and that the failure is not Ezeulu's but the god's. This triumph of Ezeulu's perspective also shows the African perspective to time.

Ezeulu's action is based on the ontological responsibility he owes to his community and this in turn illustrates the reliance on gods and ancestors. This idea of responsibility is one of the ethical notions in the novel (Nwodo 27). Responsibility here manifests two senses: the idea of trustworthiness and reliability, on the one hand, connotes that one could be counted upon to give proper account

of something under one's control (27); on the other hand, the idea of 'telling the truth always, this time it is in connection with one's descendants' (29). With regard to the issue of contention in this piece, we are looking at responsibility on the first level, Ezeulu's duty to his clan which is ontological, whereby he manages the affairs of the clan in relation to the gods and by implication maintains the essence of the community at large.

This brings up the idea of a soul/ego-extension that extends into the past. The mandate is from the gods and ancestors. The description of the shrine when Ezeulu goes there the second time is really revealing. There was an 'earth mound which represented Ulu. From the rafters right round the room the skulls of all past chief priests looked down on the mound and on their descendant and successor' (493). The mound stands for the god and the skulls are the ancestors. Their being together in one location carries the sense of a holy of holies and any message that comes forth from such a location cannot but be revered as coming directly from the highest seat of power and authority. Ezeulu is mandated to return to this source and to get more information on how to move ahead. The sense of direction for the ego and soul in this context comes from powers residing in the past. Given this dependence on the ancestors and gods, the soul and ego-extension of the African is to the past and by implication a cyclic conception of history and time.

The lack of consideration for the future in *Arrow of God* is yet indication of an African time perspective in the text. Not declaring the harvest could not be altered even on the grounds of the grave consequences it could have on the people and the community at large. Obviously, the future consequence is insignificant in resolving this problem. This is because what is valued the most as time within the African context is the present and an infinite past dominated by the gods and ancestors. If the action of the present will decimate the whole community, it is all right provided the gods and ancestors are pleased with it. If the action will benefit the

whole community in the future and the gods and ancestor are not pleased with it, it has to be put on hold. Everybody is tormented by the decision of the gods on the suspension of the harvest; not even Ezeulu is left out. But nothing could be done. Achebe puts it well in these words, '...Akuebue was the only man in Umuaro who knew that Ezeulu was not deliberately punishing the six villages. He knew that the Chief Priest was helpless; that a thing greater than *n-te* had been caught in *n-te's* trap' (503). Despite this personal torment alongside the communal one, Ezeulu could do nothing; the gods and ancestors had spoken! Not even the hardships of the future could cause a change in the decision.

Evaluation and Conclusion

In evaluation, we note that one of the advantages of the African perspective to time is that it reminds the West and their manipulative conception of time that time cannot totally be tamed as they will want us to believe. This is because the very fragmentation of time is really not in the essence of time in itself, but only in the perception of time. Time in its true character flows like a river or water torrent. Things can only fit into its flow, 'but nothing can block, or alter, or adapt, or adjust, or in any way influence its flow' (Onyeocha 34). In this flow, no one can tell the point in linear time at which a plant becomes a tree, or a youth an adult, or infancy moves into childhood. All these happen in a process that cannot be literally fragmented as the manipulative understanding of time suggests. In view of this, Onyeocha still concludes that 'linear time is therefore at best problematic in its application, and is bound to keep leading to fragmented notions of the nature and functioning of reality' (34-35). But in actual experience this is not the case, for nature functions both in its whole and as parts as well. The linear conception of time reduces reality to its fragments rather than viewing it as a whole. For this reason, it is the contention of this paper that it will not be

altogether helpful to write off the African conception of time in that it has the advantage of showing forth the total texture of time which the Western conception has relegated in the bid to achieve efficiency and even efficacy in time manipulation.

Despite the above, an inherent deficiency of this African conception of time is the fact that it cripples creativity. Creativity is essential for development and is hinged on the idea of planning; planning for the future. If a people do not have any concrete belief in the future, then why should they plan? In the popular adage, failure to plan is already a plan. It is planning to fail! For this reason, Diogne is critical of Mibiti's conception of African time. For him, the initiative for African development should be based on what he calls 'the political culture of temporality which consists in the exploration of the future, the attitude which is best expressed in the philosophical concept of prospective' (55 and 66). On this, Shimiyu holds that, 'it is due to the lack of creativity and critique that people cannot think out alternative means of development. Since they have no alternative, they give up. What they are left with is to flee their countries of origin for greener pastures in Europe or the USA' (69). Consequently, 'such an attitude leaves the African youth with the feeling that it is futureless and condemned to find tomorrow only in emigration' (66). The truth comes out further when it is realized that, out there these African migrants 'do not need to involve themselves in creative and critical activities, because everything is already in place. This explains why African professionals function very well in the West, but not back in Africa' (70). This is indeed a classic explanation for the craze of African youth to leave their countries of origin and also for the reason why professionals do well outside Africa, but are failures when invited to make their homes better.

Furthermore, the failure of governments, most especially that of Nigeria, to implement plans is also as a result of this factor. Concerted efforts have been made to build up comprehensive

development plans that will move Nigeria forward, but none of these have fared well. Due to our mental temporal attitude of the now and the past, we cannot constructively think about tomorrow. Thus, while we keep professing ‘the rhetoric of the future’, our actions are attuned to keeping the ordinances of the past alive in the present. Despite all the talks about transformation, education at the primary and secondary levels has been crippled in Nigeria. This is the clearest indication that government does not have the future in mind. If they do, then education should be a priority since this is where the youth can get empowered to drive the future. A system where the youths are dropouts and street roamers does not have the future at heart. By this attitude to ‘rudimentary education’ (primary and secondary education), the link between knowledge and planning is further severed. This stifles the ability to plan all the more. This is because planning and knowledge are ‘...inextricably linked. Planning needs knowledge’ (Bodunrin 40). On this ground, Bodunrin goes ahead to assert that ‘there is no doubt in my mind that the greatest obstacle to scientific and technological progress in Africa today is knowledge’ (40). To imbibe this attitude of planning, the future generation must be imbued with the necessary knowledge to move the continent forward. A revival of this attitude for the future resides first in the restoration of the school at the primary and secondary levels. With this in place other things can follow.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we note that *Arrow of God* is indeed an exercise in descriptive sociology couched in careful literary formulation and this is what makes it literature. Here, the predominant theme of clash of culture which runs through most of Achebe’s works is also depicted. In this case, the clash shows also in the conception of time. If there is triumph of the West in any form at all in this regard, it should be noted that it has nothing to do with any form of

mischievous manipulation on the part of West, but resides in the inherent incoherence of the African concept of time and the impatience of the people. Achebe was quite clear on this in that if it was Ulu that was punishing Ezeulu for his strong headedness 'then Ulu had chosen a dangerous time... for in destroying his priest he had also brought disaster on himself...' (513). In this instance, Ezeulu is not to be blamed but Ulu should be questioned if ever we come across him.

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