



# THE CONCEPT OF TIME IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S NOVEL *ARROW OF GOD*

**Dr. Chetan Mewada**

Associate Professor

Department of English and Communication

H.A. College of Commerce

Gujarat University

## **Abstract:**

The novel *Arrow of God* of Chinua Achebe speaks of the Igbo community under white rule. Ezeulu is the protagonist of the novel. He is the priest of custodian deity of his village, Umuaro. He is the guardian and custodian of Igbo community. He enjoys vast power. Festivals are observed and harvest is done as per his command. His power makes him proud and ambitious. He loses his integrity. His mind differs from his action. He misuses his power. He underestimates villagers. He gives importance to himself and to Ulu, the deity of the village more than his community. Being humiliated by white men, he thinks of taking revenge on his community. Respecting the command of Ulu, he does not allow people for harvesting crops. People suffer and become his enemy. Nobody respects him as before. People burn his huts. Degradation, decay and tragedy come to him. He repents and changes himself. To save his community he worships not to Ulu but to Christ. The novel thus conveys a message that no man however great can prosper going against the clan.

**Keywords:** Ezeulu, Igbo, Time

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Chinua Achebe paints a picture of an African society in *Arrow of God* that is at best rudimentary in most aspects of organization. In terms of time perspective the society is very much backwards than that of the colonizers with whom it clashes. The people of Umuaro perceive time in terms of sequence rather than in terms of separate durations of various lengths. There are therefore no seconds and minutes and hours but dawns and noon and twilights. Ezeulu's role as the timekeeper is evident as he watches for the new moon even

though his sight is failing. The opening paragraph of the novel puts the idea of time keeping at the center of the story. It clearly indicates the delicate and sometimes impossible task of this function: 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 to 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 when it finally came out it was already halfgrown. And while it played its game the Chief Priest sat up every evening waiting. From this opening paragraph three important points can be advanced which all impinge on the notion of time management. First, the chief Priest must begin watching three days for the new moon not to take a risk even though he knows when it will come out. The implication here is that he has no instrument except his failing sight as we shall demonstrate later. Second, in the present season it is much easier to see the new moon and therefore avoid mistakes in announcing its arrival. This suggests that mistakes are not uncommon. And third, in the rainy season it is much harder. The moon would sometimes come out and he would notice it only after it is already full grown. The implication being that the calendar of the people would be late by between a few days to a week or more. One may imagine the difficulty of tracing a new moon in equatorial rain forests. This is reminiscent of depending on the rooster to tell the advent of a new dawn; a practice prevalent in most African societies even though roosters are often deceived by the moonlight. There is bound to arise a clash between personal and public conceptions of time. This is connected with the oral or non-literate polity where there is little or no authenticating documents to support or refute a claim.

### **IDEA OF TIME:**

Chapter one opens with the idea of time. The lunar cycle is at the center of life. It determines the time of planting and harvest of the main crop—the yam. The indigenes can plant and harvest only on the command of the chief priest of Ulu who must bless the seeds as well as the harvest. In this task the chief priest, Ezeulu, is already experiencing difficulties as his eyes are failing, suggesting the shortsightedness in the local notion of time. He has no instrument to observe the moon but his eyes and the fact that they are failing is suggestive of the fact that he will fail in his duty eventually. When he sees a new moon he eats one of the twelve sacred yams selected from the pile of yams the villagers must bring to the priest. As we are going to see it is not the moon but the act of eating the yam that has significance. If there is a new moon and the yam has not been eaten then there has been no moon. This event-based concept of time is enunciated thus by Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu: It is epochal, as it is wrapped around events and activities. Africans reckon time for a concrete and specific purpose and not just for the sake of mathematics or in a vacuum. The African time is either time-for or time-to or time-of; whether designated, opportunistic or emergency. Numerical calendars stretching into the future and in a vacuum are not African. He argues that what exists for the African are Phenomenon

calendars, in which events which constitute time are reckoned. For instance, an expectant mother counts the lunar months of her pregnancy. The significant thing here is the pregnancy and not the months, and the months make meaning only because of the pregnancy. Thus time is meaningful at the point of the event and not at the mathematical time. For instance, if I say that I would offer sacrifice to God when the sun sets. It doesn't matter whether the sun sets at 12 or 10 minutes after 12. What is of paramount importance here is that the sacrifice was offered at sunset. The sacrifice is more important than the mathematical time when it happened. It is in this regard that Mbiti says that in Africa, man is not a slave to time but makes as much time as he wants. Time draws meaning from the event happening and not the event from the time. In Africa, human beings control and manipulate time. What is suggested from this analysis of African time is the complete absence of the idea of earliness and lateness; there is no urgency. If events are what is important and not when events take place then a medication that should be taken in the morning can as well be taken at noon, leaving a disease a good six hours to eat into the fabric of the patient. This goes far to explain the whole idea of Africa's underdevelopment and high death rates. There is ample proof of how medications are poorly administered especially in rural areas where the idea of time is still closely connected to African traditional time. The opening paragraph of the novel problematizes the idea of time by showing both the commitment of the protagonist to his duty and the weaknesses involved in allowing an aging man the duty of watching for the new moon. He is both scrupulous in his duty and incapacitated by the vagaries of nature allowing him the margin of error. Such errors are going to have far reaching consequences in the novel. The opening paragraph and the closing paragraph of the novel suggest that time is central to the plot, characterization, and theme. The story ends thus:

“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. On the one hand we see a man taking great care in his duty as seen in these lines: “Ezeulu went into the barn and took down one yam from the bamboo platform built specially for the twelve sacred yams. There were eight left. He knew there were eight; nevertheless he counted them carefully. He had already eaten three and had the fourth in his hand. He checked the remaining ones again and went back to his obi, shutting the door of the barn carefully after him”. We are here presented a man who seems more than willing to play the role he has been hereditarily given. He is systematic in the counting of the yams even though he knows there are all there. On the other hand, this function is also closely tied to a certain weakness; the propensity for the abuse of absolute power. “Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real”. The propensity for the abuse of power is already discernible. The hero thinks of the absolute power he possesses over all and kindred. Internal fissure become evident pitting him against Nwaka and Ezidimili. The twelve sacred yams serve as the barometer to measure time passage. Time halts when there is an uneaten yam regardless of how it remained uneaten.

**This is connected to time measured by cyclical nature (clocks, calendars), time and precise appointments, ceremonies and births, leading to either promptness or delays, and time represented in writing monuments and history.**

Time is related to memory; an event in the past has to be set in a time frame in order to make differences between the primordial past, which is mythological, the remote historical past and the recent past. Without a clear understanding of these different time frames the society can easily disintegrate into inconsistencies. We notice that the Umuaro have a notion of history but this notion is not fixed and therefore cannot be easily authenticated. Accounts of the past and their relation to the present are non sequitur especially when those who portend to be custodians of the tradition have faulty and discrepant accounts of time. We see this in the conflict between Umuaro and the people of Okperi. In the novel there is a clear connection between the society's time orientation and the oral nature of their organization. Most societies that have instruments for the measurement of time also have a written culture, because time measurement is a product of a technological society. A society that manages to invent a clock or a calendar must have the capacity for representing language into symbols that have meaning. It must have a scientific base. The Umuaro are an oral culture without the capacity of representing history except by word of mouth. However we quickly identify discrepant accounts of time and history emanating from confusing and falsified personal accounts that complicate the African polity. Orality here becomes connected to indefiniteness and writing definiteness. The conflict in the novel is exacerbated by the notion of the management of time; Winterbottom befriends Ezeulu because he sees in him integrity; something that is rare among the Africans. Ezeulu's integrity is justified by the fact that his notion of the past seems to be more authentic than that of his adversaries. Ezeulu takes sides against his own people over the choice of war against their neighbors and this brings him closer to Winterbottom who chooses him as a friend and partner. He will eventually summon him to make him Paramount Chief which he declines and is incarcerated for two months. Ezeulu's two months imprisonment means that time halts; not because the moon does not come and go but because the sacred yams have not been eaten. In effect, the clock of the Umuaro stops when the Chief Priest does not announce the new moon and eat the sacred yam. The eating of the yam is like turning the page of a calendar from one month to another. Society recedes two months backwards leading to catastrophic consequences as time is connected to the livelihood of the populace who can harvest their stable crop only when the new yam festival is announced. This forces the hungry to accept the colonial god who promises to protect them from the wrath of Ulu and who actually does because Ulu is a dying god.

## CONCLUSION

The appropriation of time and writing by the hero and his son Udoche shows that the people are aware of the difference in their cultural representations of time and strive to appropriate what is better. In this bid the hero demonstrates a dialectical character; one may even say that he is a manic-depressive. On the one hand he demonstrates what has come to characterize most African leaders in his selfish desire to have absolute power: "Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the

people he wondered if it was real." On the other hand he recognizes his weakness and sends his son to embrace a new technology that clearly undermines his power. Writing is timeless and allows for the measurement of progress with precision. Achebe's AG has revealed that there is indeed a great repository of oral and pre-literary tradition which our forebears have left behind for us to transmit to other generations as well as use as the moral-social pedestal and foundation for engineering new paradigm structures for internally motivated African development. Such is the template Achebe tried to expose in AG; an Igbo primordial and communal value system that defines his personality and determine his effectiveness as a creative moral citizen of his community. This is in line with the assertion of Ike that "a deeper understanding of the African culture and its people will ultimately breed a profound respect for, and embrace of, African traditional values, which, when properly understood reveal to the discerning mind a wisdom of the ages capable of providing some solutions to our contemporary search for sustainable development and a peaceful, equitable society." There is the need to harness the innovative potentials in Igbo traditional societies and cultures with a view to effecting a sustainable and self-reliant development of modern Igbo communities.

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