



University of Nigeria

2008
INAUGURAL
LECTURE

**Delay and Justice in
the Lore and Literature
of Igbo Extraction**

An Inaugural Lecture of the University of Nigeria,
Nsukka delivered on March 27, 2008

Damian Ugwuntikiri Opata
Professor of English
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

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Dedication

TO GOD WHO PROMOTES

&

**TO PROFESSOR CHINEDU NEBO,
WHOM GOD IS INSPIRING
POSITIVELY AND NOBLY AND
WHO HAS PROVED PABLO
NERUDA RIGHT THAT**

“There is no such thing as a lone struggle,
no such thing as a lone hope.”

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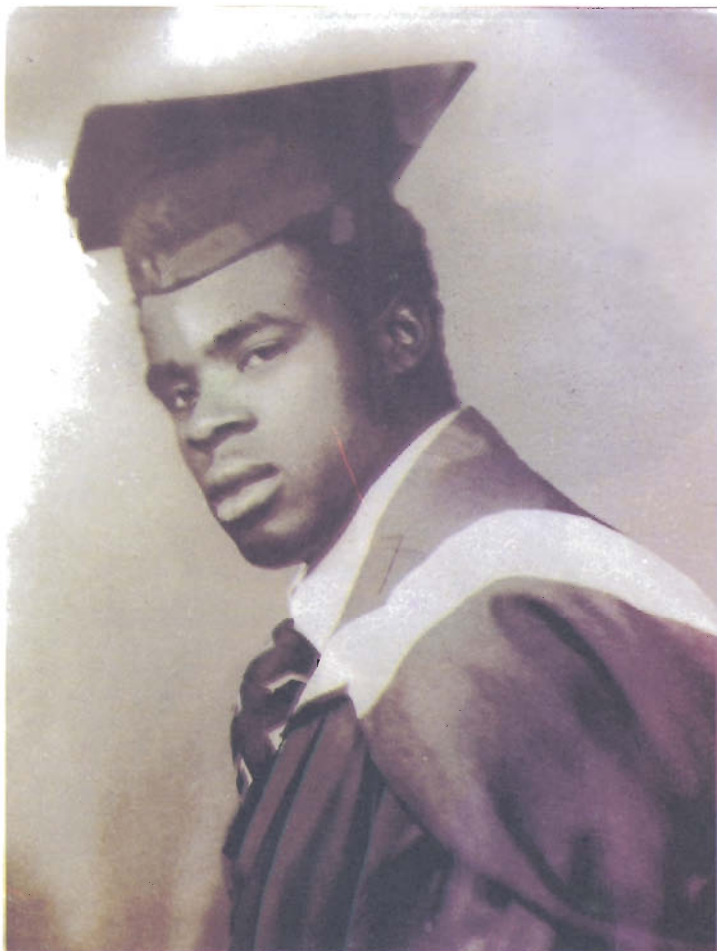


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Professor of English

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

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 Meyerhoff (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'uzọ: 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 gi mmadu, he bu ndi ka gi ma*, or "*Ndị ka gi ma, he bu ndi ka gi mmadu*", 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 anyi agbakwuru n'uzo*, 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, *uwa bu anyi 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 anyi agbakwuru n'uzo* 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 onu 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 onu 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 aetioloical 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

