

*A Pre-Modernist Reading of
"The Drum":
Chinua Achebe and the
Theme of the Eternal Return*

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There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious.

T. S. ELIOT, "East Coker"

The only time you're happy is when you don't know what time it is.

RUDY BURCKHARDT

Conversations With Rudy Burckhardt About Everything

The Drum, one of three children's stories published during the 1970s by Chinua Achebe, derives from a family of Tortoise tales, a significant component of West African oral tradition. In his introduction to *The Adventures of Torti: Tales From West Africa* (1991), Stephen U. Chukumba notes the popularity (and perhaps importance) of Tortoise tales when he asserts that there are more stories about this trickster hero "in Igbo land and perhaps in all of West Africa" (viii) than about any other character, human, or animal. In *The Drum*, Achebe uses Tortoise to meditate upon the human condition from a uniquely African viewpoint.

The plot is deceptively simple: drought and famine spur Tortoise to search for food; finding his way into spirit land, he is given a magic drum that, like the fabulous cornucopia, produces an abundance of food as desired. Tortoise decides to exploit the drum for political power, but, on-the eve of his coronation as king of the animals, the drum is broken. Tortoise returns to spirit land, to demand a replacement, but the second drum does not procure feasts; it procures pain. Bees, wasps, and masked spirits brandishing whips, pour from the drum whenever someone

beats it. Once back in the animal community, Tortoise presents his impatient brethren with this drum, and then he and his wife retreat to the safety of a nearby rock. Achebe concludes: "As for the animals, what they saw that evening has never been fully told. Suffice it to say that they fled from Tortoise's compound howling and bleeding. They scattered in every direction of the world and have not yet stopped running" (33).

The Drum succeeds as a satire on arrogance, opportunism, and greed; as a vehicle of myth,¹ it explains how we came to inhabit every corner of the Earth—and suggests how we came to suffer in our peculiar way. In this paper, I attempt to conflate literary and mythological perspectives to examine *The Drum* as a discourse between value systems and, as well, as a text saturated with a nostalgia for a bygone Golden Age, a time in which we were *different*. My premise is that the traditional notion of the Golden Age² empowers Achebe's traditionalism with visionary strength and positions a satirical attack on colonialist European values.

Among many linguistic allusions, Achebe adopts the stereotypical formulae of the fairy tale to help set the non-historical world of *The Drum* apart from the mundane world. He begins *The Drum* by invoking a world free of age: "Long, long ago, when the world was young" (1). This "long ago" invites readers to imagine the time of the beginning, which, in African lore, is also the time of the exemplars. "There [was] only one tortoise, Mbe, the ancestor of all tortoises . . . Anunu, the father of all birds . . . Enyi, the elephant; Agu, the leopard; Odum, the lion." The singularity of this era corresponds with its ideality: all of the animals lead a happy life while the "winds blew and the rains fell in their seasons and the crops grew and there was enough for everyone to eat and drink" (1)³. Achebe suggests a rapport between this imaginary era and traditional African society by looping the formulae of the fairy tale with African idioms. When Tortoise creeps after a falling palm-fruit on his first descent into spirit land, he says, "'*Today is today.*' . . . 'Where you go, my little fruit, Tortoise goes with you'" (6; emphasis added).

The idiom "today is today" emphasizes what Tortoise views as the transcending importance of his pursuit, while it suggests an exaltation of the unconditional. It liberates the moment from

the momentary, like fingers peeling fruit pulp from a hard shell. A similar conflation of the momentous and atemporality occurs in ritualistic passages depicting Tortoise's journeys. Exactly at noon, Tortoise discovers a magical fruit tree—the tree that will satisfy his quest for food and direct him to spirit land—and later returns to it exactly at noon. He embarks on his second journey "at first crow of the cock" (22). Just as "today is today" evokes a sense of suspended time, noon and dawn each suggest dynamic equilibrium: stations of the sun that, in our world, have evoked the timeless concepts of truth and hope.

A similar frozen moment occurs just as Tortoise leaves spirit land after his second visit, and marks the turning point in the story. Looking up at the sky, Tortoise finds "the sun was still overhead just as it was when he went down the hole. Was it the same day or was it tomorrow or yesterday? He couldn't say" (27). Foreshadowing the dissolution of the stable community of animals, the portentous cessation of time disorients Tortoise, signifying a subtle dimension of meaning beyond his powers of interpretation or narrowing circumstances. Like a melodramatic flash of lightning or crack of thunder, it alludes to a sense of awe and transcendence, a way of being in the world in which Tortoise (the lethal drum in hand) no longer participates. He is now lost in time, just as soon the animals will be too.

A sense of routine time molds our perception of other events. "After one week of [solitary] feasting" (perhaps a punning inversion of the religious discipline of "one week of *fasting*"), Tortoise determines that he will exploit the magical drum to raise his stature in the animal community (12). When he addresses the animals, he transposes his seven-day orgy of gluttony into an icon of magical flight: "I journeyed for seven⁴ days and seven nights and crossed seven rivers and traversed seven grasslands." While outrageously vamping as a mythic hero (an ironic re-assertion of the quest motif), Tortoise's true character shows in the perfunctoriness of the memo-like invitation he has had Anunu deliver, urging the animals to assemble at "Lunch-time tomorrow. Business: a very important message from spirit-land" (14). By juxtaposing the languages of myth and of management, Achebe skillfully belittles the diminishing scope of Tortoise's

vision (and the diminished scope of Westernized Africa). What Tortoise conceives as a strategy for self-aggrandizement is, in reality, an irretrievable loss of true grandeur. Achebe deftly reveals his central preoccupation with conflicting notions of time by expressing Tortoise's fall from grace as a declination into time, or away from that singular moment "when the world was young." Leaving Tortoise to deliver his message, Anunu observes "how very old Tortoise was becoming these days" (14).

The echoes of an historical time reverberate throughout Tortoise's anachronistic, workaday language and exert a continued pressure against the magical sense of timelessness given at the beginning of the story. "I could go on all afternoon" (17), he casually tells the animals, "but I shall reserve [additional assertions of bravery] for another day" (17). When Elephant, whom Tortoise deputizes to beat the little drum, punctures it, Tortoise offers the groundless assurance that "this is only a temporary setback which we shall soon overcome" (22). Achebe's message is nonetheless complex, despite the fact that he employs a rhetorical cliché as its medium. To keep his coronation on track, Tortoise seeks to minimize the animals' perception of the loss by positioning it within time, as an *aspect* of time. The actual catastrophic proportions of the drum's destruction—loss of the magical guarantee of subsistence and stability—are ludically disguised, within Tortoise's nonsensical doubletalk, as a reverse (or loss) of time that will (somehow) occupy a brief moment of time—"temporary setback"! Like a spike of tall grass or a stalk of wheat, this mere disturbance can be "overcome" by the scythe-like sweep of forward-moving time, with whose "cutting edge" Tortoise rhetorically identifies. But, of course, neither time nor verbal legerdemain can recover the magical moment of the lost little drum. Quite the opposite: Achebe implies that it is the irresistibility of time's hack, and its irreversibility, that guarantees the drum's extinction.

Not only does his rhetoric embody time, but Tortoise's thoughts seem to manufacture it as well. When he leaves spirit land after his second journey, he encounters the problem of not having enough time to do all he wants: "He wanted to eat . . . but [also] to rush home and resume his interrupted coronation"

(27). A moment later, as if his unspoken wish had been granted, Tortoise suddenly discovers that "there was time to eat and also get home to his installation" (27). Achebe embellishes the figure of time expanding, and of Tortoise being carried forward on its expanding wave, by an overly-meticulous mapping of Tortoise's actions. We learn, for example, that "Tortoise's return to the Country of the Animals with his drum had taken place at night. But coming home now with the second drum, he chose the middle of the afternoon" (29-31). As *The Drum* builds toward a climax, Achebe leaves increasingly less for the reader to imagine, orchestrating temporal references in an accelerating rhythm. When Tortoise teases and tempts the animals with a sense of time as a joy deferred, pretending he "had thought to rest tonight and then present the drum to you in the morning" (31), they proclaim, "WE! WANT! IT! NOW!! WE! WANT! IT! NOW!! THE! KING! OF! DRUMS!!" (31). Their frenzied drum-like chant dramatically articulates one of the story's foundational metaphors: the hotly desired "king of drums" signifies the historic moment. Just as the Elephant's heavy stroke destroyed the first drum, the stroke of the second drum—which represents the stroke of time—will destroy the community of animals. In the story's final phrase, "they scattered in every direction of the world and have not yet stopped running" (33), *The Drum* emphasizes and extends the metaphor: the pounding racket of the animals' hammering steps echoes the tyrannical pulsing of an historic awareness that will forever drum in their ears, seizing the animals as they attempt to flee.⁵ Thus, *The Drum* traces the boundary between an imaginary condition marked by timelessness, in which "all live a happy life" (1), and "real-time," in which all animals continue to run madly to flee their pain.

A comparable intuitive exploration of timelessness and time forms the core of writings by the Roumanian philosopher and novelist, Mircea Eliade, a brief examination of which reveals the same ontological polarities underlying *The Drum*, and illuminates its subtle, caustic critique of the West. Like Achebe, Eliade distinguishes between an imaginative relation to time and the modern construct of history. As he writes in *The Myth of The Eternal Return* (1971), history exists for modern humanity as "a succession of

events that are irreversible, unforeseeable, possessed of autonomous value" (95). It encompasses our own, personal experiences, which we can validate empirically, and "the totality of the human experience provoked by inevitable geographical conditions, social structures [and] political conjunctures" (119). History also signifies our abstract concept of these events, whose dominating presence in modern thought appears in the tendency of Western philosophy "to define man as above all a historical being conditioned, and in the end created, by History" (*Myths, Dreams* 233-34). I suggest that Achebe's argument with history is also his argument with the West.

In contrast to an all-encompassing historical matrix, which defines the human condition for modern humanity, traditional humanity possesses an awareness of history which it seeks to annul by invoking a transhistorical moment, *illud tempus*.⁶ Eliade defines *illud tempus* as an ever-accessible, transhistorical time of the beginnings, or as the "gestures, acts, and decrees" (*Myth* 155) that occurred at the beginning and provide paradigms of behaviour for traditional humanity to imitate. It is the ceaseless preoccupation of traditional peoples to imitate the paradigmatic and regain—"reactualize"—the atemporal moment of the beginning (*in illo tempore*). In these all-inclusive moments, which, for traditional humanity, are moments of ultimate reality, time becomes suspended, and history stops.

Eliade's concept of a traditional aversion to time may illuminate the implied symmetry of *The Drum* as intended "reactualizations." We can, from an Eliadic perspective, interpret Tortoise's second journey, not merely as an attempt to replace the broken drum, but as a gesture intended to "reactualize" *illud tempus*, the atemporal moment in which it first appeared. Reflexively, the lost drum assumes the temporal simultaneity of a Janus-like symbol, gazing back upon a Golden Age (extolled as the "long, long ago, when the world was young"), while suggesting the possibility of a future "reactualization," when the suffering posited at the story's conclusion will once again cease. From this perspective, we can view *The Drum* as a double symbol, of truth—that is, ultimate reality—and hope.

The Drum's formal symmetry locates it within a sub-genre of African tales in which two journeys are posited, the second being

an unsuccessful attempt to mimic the first and intended similarly to reap a magical boon. Cyprian Ekwensi's "The Pot From The River" (1965), Onadipe's *The Magic Land of the Shadows* (1970), and Achebe's *The Flute* (1977), among others, are examples of this Double-Journey sub-genre. While the first quest succeeds in obtaining an unlooked for benefit, the second always fails, sabotaged by the questor's own self-interest. In "The Pot From The River," two spirits counsel the protagonist that she will hear "a din like the tinkle of bells," and must hurl one of her pots to the ground and shatter it (19). She obeys, and magically engenders a prosperous town. However, when her jealous sister attempts to trace her steps, she wilfully refuses the spirits' counsel and engenders a horrible epidemic instead. Whether she is being punished for her impudence (as she would be in a cautionary tale) or for her failure to represent faithfully her sister's behavior (an Eliadic reading), the results are the same. As in *The Drum*, the second, mimetic journey seems designed specifically to validate the representation of an ideal by straying from it into self-portraiture.

The Drum exaggerates the form by straying into parody. Part of its appeal to children derives from the ridiculous impression of Tortoise mimicking a repertoire of seemingly random, devalued actions. Achebe re-imagines Tortoise's mimetic⁷ quest as a mechanical exercise, a joyless kind of scavenger hunt, upon which — to duplicate the original — he must first, talk to a tree; second, drop a fruit; third, crawl after it down a hole; fourth, scold a spirit boy; and fifth, demand a drum and come home. While he appears superficially to be burlesquing repetition, Achebe is really repeating the affirmation of fidelity, which is intrinsic to the genre, by validating the context of improvisation and spontaneity in which the original journey occurred.

Tortoise's attempt to read through to the "real" behind the original ritual or to represent only some of the original acts leads him to discover his own, burlesque "reality." By exaggerating Tortoise's buffoonery, Achebe employs the particular acts Tortoise disregards or carelessly overlooks as an ironic frame for affirming what is good about life, or what is genuine and ennobling. While they may be as simple as affirming the sensual pleas-

ure of eating,⁸ these uniterated affirmations implicitly center a profoundly different view of life of noteworthy sophistication.

For example, Achebe uses the mimetic journey to probe the definitively modern notions of individualism—of making “one-self within history”—and historicism—ascribing “*reality* [solely] to an event within History” (*Myth* 141). On his originary journey, Tortoise asks the palm tree how many fruits it bears. The enchanted tree responds, “thrice four hundred” (5), and so the famished Tortoise becomes enraptured: he thinks he hears “faint sounds of a drum rising from this good and generous earth. Or perhaps . . . only happiness beating the drum in his heart” (5). This charming passage prefigures Tortoise’s accession of the magical drum, and allows that its puissance may represent a facet of Tortoise’s inner exaltation. Achebe posits a clear although indefinable reciprocally informing relationship between what he feels and what Tortoise perceives to be real around him, and a hint that, like the romantic, “Long, long ago,” Tortoise’s journey is a projection of an internalized, transhistorical ideal—an exaltation beyond Tortoise and beyond the drum.

To begin his mimetic journey, Tortoise repeats his question, but the tree remains silent. (Is it disenchanting, or is Tortoise?) He imperturbably asserts, “I think you have something. Anyway I shall come up and see for myself” (24). Tortoise’s self-assured, colloquial response opts out of the mythic structure of the scene, rendering it slightly incoherent. He seems a realistic figure attempting to enter a two-dimensional representation, or, to pose a comparison whose ambiguity lies closer to the story, a feverish sleeper attempting to slake his real thirst in a dream. Unlike his earlier experience of an enchanted unity between the “sounds . . . from this good and generous earth” and the beating of “his heart,” here Tortoise is pleased with his distinctiveness within his surroundings, as his language, rich only in personal pronouns, conveys. Because he denies the possibility of transcendental union with nature and the subordination of self (upon which, perhaps, such a union depends), Tortoise’s imitation lacks imagination.

Rejecting the dignity and mystery of nature, Tortoise sleepwalks through his mimetic journey; this becomes apparent in his

attempts to make the fallen fruit go into the hole-tunnel. In his first journey, the fruit accidentally slips from his hand and lands beside the hole, and then, as if possessed of a will of its own, rolls in. This image of nature's unpredictability and playfulness, its inexhaustible potential for serendipity, disappears in Tortoise's mimetic journey, replaced instead by an image of Tortoise's tediousness. This time, Tortoise pitches the palm-fruit, but it fails even to come near the hole. He must nudge it closer with his foot, and then push it in.⁹ In contrast to the ease and speed with which the first palm-fruit plunges through the tunnel into spirit land, now the tunnel has become uncomfortably constricted, and Tortoise must squeeze through, butting the second fruit forward slowly.

Achebe may be parodying Tortoise's dull political maneuvering (to reach "the top") in this image of his second descent to spirit land, associating him with another trickster figure from Greek mythology. He pushes, crawls a bit and finds "again it was within easy reach and again he called it a useless fruit and pushed it further and continued to curse and push it all the way into spirit land" (24). The reduced scope of the tunnel within which Tortoise crawls ironizes his self-importance, as well as his guile—salencies of the modern "actual, determined, conditioned human existence" (Rennie 42), which *The Drum* disparages. (By contrast, alluding to the myth of Sisyphus expands *The Drum's* rapport with myth, which provides Achebe's own exemplary models.¹⁰)

While Tortoise's second journey sets the indirection and serendipity of his first journey in vivid relief, it also serves as a foil for Achebe's traditional aesthetic and his own acknowledgement of exemplars. Achebe's references to *The Drum's* mythological antecedents carefully configure both of Tortoise's journeys as a descent into the land of the dead, an instance of self-sacrifice.¹¹ A sombre analog, the persistence of sacrificial elements in contemporary African children's literature attests to their power and significance in the traditional imagination. The necessity of sacrifice to a traditional sense of ontology, and, perforce, its necessary presence within traditional stories, occupies a central place in Eliade's discussions of *illud tempus*. "A sacrifice . . . not only

exactly reproduces the initial sacrifice revealed by a god *ab origine*, at the beginning of time, it also takes place at that same primordial mythical moment . . . every sacrifice repeats the initial sacrifice and coincides with it. All sacrifices are performed at the same mythical instant of the beginning; through the paradox of rite, profane time and duration are suspended" (*Myth* 35).

In the traditional African world view, sacrifice enables self-transcendence (the act to which Tortoise alludes by shrinking from it). Sacrifice, notes John S. Mbiti, "marks the point where the visible and invisible worlds meet, and shows man's intention to project himself into the invisible world" (57). Alluding to the myth of sacrifice, Achebe invokes the spectre of humility and suffering, again serving to deprecate Tortoise's ambition. As Mbiti further notes, "when blood is shed in making a sacrifice, it means that human or animal life is being given back to God who is in fact the ultimate source of all life" (59). Planting overt mythological references in Tortoise's bravura speeches, and having one of the characters sarcastically comment, "Tortoise as saviour! What a joke" (16), enables Achebe to achieve a comical distance from the harsh penumbra of his exemplar, while signaling his commitment to the story's authenticity, the traditional concern with representation and the suspension of profane time.

Stylistically, Achebe's virtuosity in the medium of representation subverts the narrative constructs of past and present. When Tortoise has captured his "king of drums," he feels he has now concluded his business in spirit land; in a passage ripe with echoes, Achebe writes: "Tortoise was so pleased with himself that he *whistled* all the way up the *seven* great steps that led from the underworld" (27) [my italics]. The most plangent echo is of Tortoise's first, bombastic rendition of his journey, his "seven great steps" recollecting the oratorical figure of "seven rivers and seven grasslands." But, a softer echo recalls Tortoise's delight after enjoying the benefit of the first drum, when, "after a few steps he remembered the hole in the ground and went back and knelt down and whispered, 'Thank you' seven times into it. Then he began the journey home, whistling happily all the way" (10).

As this expression of exhilaration and humility is recollected simultaneously with Tortoise's egotistical, manipulative as-

sertions, Achebe yokes together three moments, collapsing the historical scaffold dividing them. As narrative time dissolves, the effect is of three photographs of the same image overlaid. Such a trope gracefully places Achebe's aesthetic in a certain relationship to a principle corresponding to Northrop Frye's sense of "myth [as] an art of a shared implicit metaphorical identity" (136). In the traditional imagination, these events occupy the exact same moment, and signify an archetypal occasion *in illo tempore*. Achebe's aesthetic reenactment of a traditional or mythic view contravenes the principle of mimesis Tortoise represents and its underlying assumption of concatenating events, and coincides meaningfully with Henri Bergson's notion of one kind of time in which the human consciousness "refrains from separating its present state from its former states . . . but forms both . . . into an organic whole" (100). Antithetically, Tortoise, in championing the autonomy of the self, exists exclusively as a version only of himself, a self shrinking within its isolation. This fateful condition, whose disorientation and turmoil Achebe castigates at the conclusion of *The Drum*, chimes with Eliade's idea of the essential meaninglessness of modernity beheld from a traditional vantage point. If "everything which lacks an exemplary model is 'meaningless,' i.e., it lacks reality" (*Myth* 34), as Eliade states then, Achebe presents us with no version, but the true story of *The Drum*.

To comprehend a traditionalist reading of *The Drum* requires understanding that Achebe's audience would intuitively reject the figuration of a unique self. It will be difficult for a Western reader to accept that *The Drum* does not intend to vilify Tortoise merely for his own, peculiarly inadequate characteristics but, through Tortoise, to mount an assault upon the concept of individuality itself, because, in the West, this concept represents an ideal: and, indeed, it forms the character of much of Western children's literature. For example, Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, one of the most popular works for children in our century, celebrates the independence of Max, a boy who sails alone into the eerie realm of the imagination, bends the "Wild Things" he finds there to his will, and thereby proves himself worthy of love and self-respect. While appreciation of Sendak's book

has focused on it as a saga of psychological integration, of the selfsubduing its own fears, dark proclivities, or boisterous sub-personalities, none of its commentators has pointed out what should be obvious: Max's heroic subjugation of the intimidating but then gratefully subservient Wild Things is a reenactment *par excellence* of the colonialist ideal of imposing order upon the other.

Although a valorization of colonialist imperialism, *Where The Wild Things Are* nonetheless represents a version of the same journey story retold in *The Drum*. Not only does the protagonist return, in triumph, to a nourishing meal, but there is even an insinuation that his journey has mysteriously stopped time: does Max's bowl of soup not somehow remain hot? However, while some Western readers can happily identify with the conquering and civilizing Max, some non-Western readers might be excused if they do not rejoice in the servility of the Wild Things. While Max's self-assertiveness and domineering attitude toward the Wild Things helps to ground the Western reader's assumptions about the priority of the self, the same characteristics adopted by Tortoise are intended to destabilize those assumptions, and exhibit the *prima facie* shortcomings of the modern condition and the corrupt charter¹² of the colonialist. That individuality is itself incompatible with the traditional imperative to abolish history, Eliade, for whom "Human individuality . . . constitutes the authenticity and irreversibility of history" (*Myth* 46), argues consistently. Because we can validate this historical quiddity for ourselves, it is this that traditional humanity cannot tolerate, which is suggested as a premise of the loss of paradise in *The Drum*.

A comparable view of individuality can be seen in the traditional African attitude toward the afterlife, particularly toward "those who died a long time ago" (Mbiti 70). Mbiti denotes two categories of the long-dead, both of which may supply background for a nuanced understanding of *The Drum*. The first category of long-dead spirit will sometimes be

presented in exaggerated human forms. In some stories, they appear to be like animals or plants or inanimate things. They may be shown as doing both human and extra-human things, or they may appear stupid and naive.

Mbiti construes these spirits as a "literary device by means of which people caricature human life, satirize one another, make comments on society, and give an outlet to their feelings of fear, hatred or frustration" (71). One can easily discern their resemblance to Tortoise, and wonder if traditional readers would regard Tortoise as part of their society. He would also seem to be ironically related, as an unfaithful cipher, to the second category of long-dead spirits, who are featured in "mythological legends [and] ceremonies" as spirits "elevated in mythology and ritual to the status of divinities" (72).

But whether the spirits of the long-dead in African traditional religion lend themselves to satire or serve to charter specific rites and beliefs, they utterly lack personal awareness, or "historical consciousness" (*Myth* 47). Their survival is impersonal, and their transformation into spirits "signifies their reidentification with the impersonal archetype of the ancestor" (*Myth* 47). Tortoise's demeanor in spirit land during his second journey appears to insult this attitude: "Show us the drum!" Tortoise commands the spirit father, "in the tone of an emperor" (26)—not unlike Max's demeanor in the land of the Wild Things. That Tortoise's personality constitutes an absurdity is suggested by Achebe's selection of the exotic term, "emperor," and no less explicitly in the spirit's reply: "this way, sir" (26), which connotes mock-serenity, the trailing honorific implying a guarded aloofness from the person, and, perhaps from the distinctly foreign language used to pantomime (merely) respect. (In contrast, in Ugorji's version of "The Magic Drum," it is Torti who addresses the intimidating Gatekeeper as "sir.")

However, Tortoise's self-possession in the underworld may strike a modern reader as admirable, for whom survival stripped of personal memories is incomprehensible and for whom such an afterlife may seem scarcely worth living. Yet, Eliade asks, "what is personal and historical in the emotion we feel when we listen to the music of Bach, in the attention necessary for the solution of a mathematical problem, in the concentrated lucidity presupposed by the examination of any philosophical question?" (*Myth* 47-48).

Achebe's ridicule centres on Tortoise but not exclusively. He ridicules also the animals for their docility. As Tortoise pre-

pares for his second journey, his departure is cheered by the animals, one of whom retorts, "what's the good of a king without a food drum?" This remark, described by Meena Khorana as a gesture of "ingratitude and rudeness" (68), indicts this African community for its cynical and short-sighted embrace of materialism, an attitude conveyed more fulsomely and bitterly in Achebe's description of modern Kenya in *No Longer At Ease*, which lays the corruption of post-colonial Africa at the feet of the continuing imposition of Western economic domination.

In "The Significance for Modern Man of Mircea Eliade's Work," Charles Long elaborates upon the cause of Achebe's despair with African malaise, observing that "a materialistic approach to history . . . cannot tell us why we cannot truly enjoy our life; it cannot tell us why we have lost our sense of meaning" (142).

In a similar vein, Eliade argues that traditional humanity's notion of *illud tempus*—by which it could perceive Being in the absolute—enabled it to tolerate the suffocating "terror of history" (*Myth* 150). While *illud tempus* lends traditional humanity the ability to describe meaningfully and to relate events to a mythology of exemplars, it can locate itself within a coherent and consolidated universe. For modern humanity, historicism precludes any transcendental meaning. Its rationalism and its relativism cannot confer meaning, nor palliate the suffering of being in the world. It lacks the means to teach us how to react coherently. Moreover, its exclusiveness denies validity to any version of reality but the historical.

But this historicism speaks for the elite. The valorization of history serves the emperor, the dynast, the colonialist, and, as Eliade has noted, it "was created and professed above all by thinkers," such as Hegel and Heidegger, "belonging to nations for which history has never been a continuous terror." Had such philosophers belonged to nations marked by the "fatality of history" (*Myth* 152), he asserts, they might have thought differently. The traditional conceptualization of *The Drum*, the iteration of *illud tempus* and its erasure of history, does, in fact, assert a different perspective, one that is *innately subversive*, and, as Bryan S. Rennie eloquently asserts, worthy of our attention. "It is very

much time that we listened to the point of view of the other . . . the victims of empire. These are, after all, the great majority of humanity" (99). It is, in fact, for some part of this humanity that the children's literature of postcolonial Africa has only now begun to speak, and it is this traditional voice that tells the simple tale of *The Drum*.

NOTES

- ¹ In his etiological theory, Andrew Lang proposed that myths offer "a cause or explanation of something in the real world" (Graves 53).
- ² The myth of the Golden Age concerns the loss and return of an ideal time, or an ideal possessed of a sense of timelessness. Correspondingly, *The Drum* invests certain objects, events and values with a sense of timelessness, and, others with a sense of historical time.
- ³ Achebe's succinct description corresponds to other African accounts of the Golden Age. In *Nyumba Ya Mumbi: The Gikuyu Creation Myth* (1992), Kariuki Gakuo writes, more fully: "In the evening, when the flocks came home from grazing, the sound of pounding pestles filled the air. The voices of the nine daughters, rich with the melody of grinding grain, carried over the trees and onto the plains. After many moons had gone by, the nine girls grew into beautiful women who rippled with the beauty of the full moon. Their eyes twinkled like stars in the moonlight, while their breasts, full and ripe, stood proud as the dazzling peaks of *Kirinyaga*. Their enchanting laughter was like the sweet chorus of birds and their milky teeth glittered like white doves in flight. When they walked, the melody of the beads around their waists rose to the sky, deep, sombre and enchanting" (19-20).
- ⁴ Achebe uses the number seven to mythologize the beginning of *Things Fall Apart*, a novel whose apocalyptic theme is reflected in its allusive title. "Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights" (7).
- ⁵ The conjunction of aimless flight and historical time occurs elsewhere in post-colonial African children's literature. In Kola Onadipe's striking *The Magic Land of the Shadows*, it is the vanity of pursuing riches this image ridicules. Taiba journeys to the Land of Shadows to get wealthy, and is punished for such effrontery by being driven mad, and rapidly aged.
- ⁶ Bryan S. Rennie's etymology of *Illo Tempore* points back to the time sense captured in folktale and myth: "For readers unfamiliar with Latin, it is worthwhile to point out that *illud tempus* simply means 'that time.' It occurs in Jerome's Vulgate where it is usually indicates the *Heilsgeschichte* in which God's actions were seen as unquestionably decisive for humanity. The alternative, in *illo tempore*, is . . . the locative case of the same phrase, *in* that time. In many ways it is a narrative device comparable with 'once upon a time,' although indicative of far greater sacrality."
- ⁷ Tortoise's mimetic quest is mimetic in a double sense: it attempts to mimic the original journey, a usage corresponding to Aristotle's idea of *mimesis praxeos*, and, it hews to a plausible representation of contemporary attitudes, and so gives a likeness of what the audience knows.

- ⁸ On his original journey, Tortoise drops the palm-fruit accidentally, after first cramming his mouth full with as many fruit as it would hold. On his mimetic journey, he climbs immediately to the tree top (a symbol of his political ambition), plucks one fruit and purposely "lets it fall to the ground" (24). Achebe appears to be ridiculing the preposterousness of self-advancement by depicting how Tortoise's capacity for pleasure has diminished.
- Achebe uses the fruit to make an additional point. When Tortoise first visits the spirit land, he meets a spirit boy who has eaten the palm-fruit that Tortoise dropped, believing it fell out of the sky as a gift to him. By scolding the boy for eating his fruit (a dubious claim), Tortoise persuades the boy's spirit father to award him the drum. When Tortoise next meets the spirit boy, the second fruit he has pushed into spirit land lies unattended on the ground. Relinquishing any possible pleasure, the boy has warily let the fruit alone. In what approximates a parody on the Biblical myth of the Fall, Tortoise ruthlessly deceives the innocent boy into eating the fruit, and then berates him contemptuously, crying "Stupid boy! When will you ever learn?" (26). Thus, *The Drum* uses the palm-fruit to contrast innocent pleasure with a false standard of judgment.
- ⁹ The real arduousness and absurdity of the effort, as in many of the scenes comprising the mimetic quest, is enhanced by the reader's growing identification of Tortoise as a tortoise. If the line extending from Tortoise's first journey to his second delineates the transformation of ritual to routine, it also seems to characterize the transformation of the ideal into the historical (of Tortoise into a tortoise). In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade defines historical man as essentially opposed to transcendence, accepting "no model for humanity outside the human condition" (202n). It is this attitude Achebe mockingly illustrates by suggesting that Tortoise can imagine no Being beyond himself—accepting no model for chelonia outside the chelonian condition.
- ¹⁰ Sisyphus, like Tortoise, is said to have made two journeys to the underworld before being consigned to his exemplary punishment recorded by Ovid, Homer, Pausanais, and others. Robert Graves notes, in the *Greek Myths*, that Hesychius spelled Sisyphus as "Sesephus," thought to be a Greek variant of Tesup, the Hittite sun-god, and that the stone he was doomed perpetually to push up a mountain represented a "sun-disk, and the hill up which he rolled it the vault of heaven" (I, 219). Tortoise's palm-fruit, plucked from the topmost branch, also suggests an image of the sun, and his own struggles to push it along may suggest a distant relation to those of the sun-god's, destined forever to repeat the yearly cycle. Speculating upon *The Drum*'s resemblance to the solar myth helps restore logic to Tortoise's illogical insistence that the spirit child give up the fruit he has just consumed since the permanent extinction of the sun would be inconceivable.
- Speculating upon the drum as a surrogate of the palm fruit and thus as a symbol of the sun strengthens a reading of *The Drum* as a myth about time, and, as well, about the recovery of a golden age. Should Tortoise's mythic purpose be to maneuver the sun around the zodiac, then *The Drum* serves the function of a New Year's myth, which, as Eliade delineates in "Year, New Year, Cosmogony" (*Myth* 51-62) is one of the most significant occasions for abolishing time and, by reactualizing *illud tempus*, the new year.
- ¹¹ Tortoise himself, when addressing the assembly of animals, declares the mythic engine of his journey. "I said to myself: 'All the animals in the country will perish unless somebody comes forward to save them. Somebody who is prepared to risk his own life for the sake of his fellows'" (16). Achebe deems the passage significant enough to appear in italics. The solemnity of this gesture is appraised in Tortoise's second act of public oratory: "when he told his wife he was going to the land of spirits, she burst into tears" (19). Achebe adds, slyly, that "nobody worried about such little details" (19), deceptively lightening the too somber passage. The allusion is elsewhere sharpened: "Some of the animals laughed at the thought. Tortoise as saviour!"

What a joke" (16). Later in the story, the ritual basis of Tortoise's journey is invoked yet again, when, Achebe describes Tortoise's final ascent as leaving the "underworld" (27), not the bouncier spirit land.

¹² Malinowski asserted that myths serve as "'charters' for customs, institutions, or beliefs" (in Rennie 68).

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