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## History, Culture and Tradition in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*

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### ABSTRACT

Nigerian literature has evolved over the past fifty years and no longer looks like it used to when first generation writers Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and their contemporaries first started to write in the late 1950's. Nigeria itself has changed greatly since the time of colonialism and nationalism. But, present generation Nigerian literary artist even though swamped by globalization and neo-colonialism, continue to tread the path of the writers before them by the reiterating in their works, the need to engage with and confront the distorted and sometimes, untold histories of their societies. Helon Habila in *Measuring Time* (2007), presents the simple statement that a society's present is better understood if its history is better known in all its glory and shame. He goes on to show a concern with the need for the people to be the ones to voice or relate that history. Writing on issues, that are not only relevant but also timely, he shows how that the more fully we understand our past, the better we are likely to understand ourselves. With this background, the present paper aims to explore Helon Habila's concern with history, culture and tradition in *Measuring Time* with the intention of highlighting his presentation and reassessment of these within the threshold of governance in Keti in particular and in Nigeria in general.

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## 1. Introduction

The need to expose many social situations in the society has always been the preoccupation of writers everywhere, and contemporary Nigerian writers like Helon Habila (1967 - ) are no exception. Indeed, it is the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie (2006) who said, “To write fiction is to try to make sense of the world” (n.p). Edward Said (1993) further explains this need, which writers have to expose social situations in their societies when he opines that:

Stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history...when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back and who now plans its future – these issues were reflected, contested and even for a time decided in narrative. (p. xiii).

In *Measuring Time* (2007), Habila through the character of Mamo, attempts to make sense of the world by scrutinizing history, culture and tradition and he does this by re-addressing the place of history in the Nigerian Middle Belt town of Keti. This attempt by Habila accords with the philosopher George Santayana’s (1906) assertion that, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (p.82). From a detailed study of Habila’s fictional world in *Measuring Time*, it is apparent that this writer holds the above truism by his passionate attempt in the novel to confront aspects of Nigerian history and that of the people of Keti through the study of written documents and oral tradition.

*Measuring Time* tells the story of Mamo and LaMamo who, though are twins, are very different in character and disposition. Mamo, around whom the story revolves, is sickly, withdrawn but deep.

LaMamo is healthy, lively, and the one who acts on the spur of the moment, but they complement each other – each twin bringing to the table something the other lacks but needs. They lose their mother at birth and are raised by their widowed aunt Marina because their father Lamang, a politician and a business man is distant and not interested in them in the same way he was not interested in their mother Tabitha. Their hatred for their father stands out most, amongst the things that unite them. They become separated in their early twenties when LaMamo leaves Keti to explore the West African frontiers as a hired mercenary soldier. Mamo, due to his health challenges, is unable to leave with his brother, thus, remains in Keti. The twins do not meet again until after a long period of time; but, from mails exchanged between them, we are kept updated of LaMamo’s experiences and challenges at different war zones in the West African region. Meanwhile, under the tutelage of his Uncle Iliya, Mamo becomes a local school teacher, the Mai of Keti’s secretary and a recorder of the history of Keti and his life takes a turn different from what he had envisaged. We see Mamo mature and grown into a young man who starts to be aware of a responsibility and a place in the world as he gives something to his community through his work—the truth.

Habila, in *Measuring Time*, through the characters Mamo and Lamamo, shows us, through their different journeys in life and their experiences, that the secret to survival is in being able to know, own and speak your own truth. He also exposes the dysfunctionalities and problems that have persistently continued to besiege the political terrain in Nigeria in the exploration of the antics of the Waziri to the Mai of Keti and also through the political adventures of Lamang. But most important, especially for



this paper, is Habila's concern with the place of history, culture and tradition in the understanding and negotiation of the present.

## 2. Background to the Existing Literature

Chinua Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and his contemporaries like Ngugi wa Thiongo in *Weep Not Child* (1965), are amongst the first of African writers to reconstruct the past by re-writing their people's encounter with colonial history. Chinua Achebe alleges that he was challenged to write *Things Fall Apart* after reading novels on Africans by non-Africans (e.g. Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), which did not portray Africa as he knew it and Africans as he knew them. He, therefore, sought amongst other things to correct such wrong artistic impressions (Umaisha, 2007: n.p). Contemporary Nigerian fiction engages with an investigation of history amongst other themes. Hence, Helon Habila is not the only contemporary Nigerian writer confronting history in his writing. Okey Ndibe in *Arrows of Rain*(2000), Uzodinma Iweala in *Beasts of no Nation* (2005), Chimamanda Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun*(2006), Biyi Bandele in *Burma Boy*(2007), and their contemporaries are revisiting not only the history that their parents and their grandparents before them have lived, but also the one they have experienced and are providing new perspectives into some of these historical events as lived by ordinary people by telling these stories in their own words and on their own terms.

## 3. Depiction of History, Culture, and Tradition in *Measuring Time*

Habila's *Measuring Time* presents a history that tells the stories of "individuals, ordinary people who toil and dream and suffer"(p.152).The history that Habila writes is therefore not merely a radical reinvention

of racist colonial history but also an unequivocal window into historical events as lived by ordinary people, even the unpleasant characters (p.243). LaMamo and Mamo are in a local idiomatic way of speaking, the voices and eyes through which Habila exposes the oddities, the trauma, the difficulties and the impediments of governance and life in the Middle Belt town of Keti. In this story, we are presented with a brilliant and innovative fictional recreation of history and art that exposes the painful realities in the society. The tale in *Measuring Time* has been told in diverse ways but the timelessness of the turbulence in life that it presents seems to remain continuously with us. This is the reason why Said (1993), is of the opinion that-

Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present. What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past is really past, over and concluded, or whether it continues albeit in different forms perhaps. (p.1).

Habila's *Measuring Time*, like Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2005) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007), Jude Dibia's *Unbridled* (2007), and Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*( 2006), also displays a pre occupation with the critical presentation of the oddities in the home, the community and the country in general. Indeed Carmen McCain (2006) posits that, "Habila shows a concern with the history of the nation also being the history of the individual" (n.p). Thus, the disorderliness, exploitation, dysfunction and tyrannical trauma, prevalent in the micro-society, inevitably extend to the macro-society.

### 3.1 History



*Measuring Time* charts the history of Keti, Nigeria and some parts of West Africa through the eyes of Mamo and his twin brother, LaMamo. Habila, in this novel, contends that history is the very foundation on which every society is built and that every society has the responsibility of putting its history in the right perspective. Indeed, he opines in the text itself that, “A true history is one that looks at the lives of individuals, ordinary people who toil, dream and suffer, who bear the brunt of whatever vicissitude time inflicts on the nation” (p.152). Thus, as long as there are people, there is a history; history in the sense of a chronicle, a record, an account that is either written down or passed down by word of mouth of the origins and the starting point of nationhood and this history is to be used to gain leverage on the present.

History helps place what is happening today in life socially and politically in perspective and in the process helps us make connections that enables us to understand the present and to also understand why the present is the way it is. Concurring with this argument, Akin Akinola (1981) asserts that “it is through recourse to history that communities, groups and peoples often define their identities and ruling groups establish their legitimacy. This is why the story of origins looms very large in folk histories, and dynasties.... Man everywhere displays an avid interest in his antecedents and history panders to this sentiment considerably” (p.1). Concerning history, Habila (2007) observes that, “All history entails a certain degree of subjectivity and should not lead to a disregard for facts” (p.156). Thus, the passion for addressing this ‘disregard’ for facts seems to be the main preoccupation of Habila in *Measuring Time*, and it agrees with Salman Rushdie’s (1991), postulation that “literature can and perhaps

must give the lie to official facts” (p.14). And Chimamanda Adichie (2010) further supports this view when she asserts that, “Until we acknowledge things to be the way they are we cannot own them and we cannot control them” (n.p).

Through the character Mamo, Helon Habila expresses a concern with the need for history to be a source of inspiration in the process of trying to state what is, what was, in the way it was (p.156). Mamo’s relationship with history starts at the threshold of his turning twenty years of age when he gets admitted into the state university to read history. His formal education comes to a halt after two years at the university during a sickle cell crisis; but his engagement with history does not end there, as fate had something more practical in store for him. Mamo’s Uncle Iliya encouraged him to teach history at the local community school. And even though, “Mamo had never envisaged himself as a village school teacher; it never featured not even as a brief detour on the map of his dream of fame and mortality” (p.72), he accepts the offer.

During the course of his work as a teacher, a request is placed before him at the Keti emirate palace to write the biography of the Mai. Stumbling on a book on the history of Keti, written by the missionary, Reverend Drinkwater brings about a burning desire to search for the ‘truth’. Mamo sees the book as a gross misrepresentation of his people’s history by a foreign subjective historian. The Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) position, on the subaltern, is relevant to an understanding of this show of concern by Mamo with the gross misrepresentation of his people’s history by a foreign subjective historian. The term ‘Subaltern’ is derived from the philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s (1891-1937) work and according to the postcolonial theorist, Robert J.C. Young



(2003), the term refers to a person being “from a minority, to live as the person who is always in the margins, the person who never qualifies as the norm, the person who is not authorized to speak”(p.1). Spivak, (1998) in her essay ‘Can the Subaltern speak?’ expresses a concern with the way knowledge about the subaltern by the West is never innocent. She contends that when the West speaks about the Third World, it always enforces its own western consciousness and values on it and thus, that knowledge is tainted with the political and economic interest of the West. The distortion of knowledge about the ‘other’ has its roots in colonialism whereby, the colonizer misrepresents the history of the colonized to justify colonization. Arguing along these lines Edward Said (1978), postulates in his book *Orientalism* that much of western study about the ‘Other’ was for self-affirmation rather than for objective intellectual enquiry and academic study. Thus, the West’s study of the ‘other’ functions as a method of cultural discrimination and imperial domination. Therefore, what Habila does in *Measuring Time* is to interact with the colonial discourse, by [re]telling the story from the perspective of the ordinary oppressed person, what Young (2003) describes as “a down to top perspective” meaning, telling the story not from the top (the empowered) to the down (the disempowered), but from the down to the top (PP: 6 & 8).

By insisting on telling their story themselves, Mamo and the people of Keti were symbolically contesting being dominated and defined by people other than themselves. Expectantly, the telling of their history, the sorting out and the straightening of facts concerning their origins is of the utmost importance to them, but then, as Mamo discovers when he sends an article on

the history of Keti to a journal in London (p.151), the West is comfortable with its views about the ‘other’ and is not in any hurry to change those views. For the people of Keti, the telling of their history does not demand a particular time but must be told at all times with the knowledge that life, no matter how ordinary, should not be ignored, it is important that history, any history, is not forgotten. But then questions arise that call for answers. What do we do with history and what lessons do we learn from it? Concerning this, the writer, Biyavanga Wainaina (2006) advises that, “we need to take control of our history, so we can make sense of our present” (n.p).

In many instances, the process of discovery, either as a person or as a people, come with discoveries that are sometimes painful. Mamo in *Measuring Time* realises this in his quest for the truth concerning the origins of his people. It seems that the request from the palace at Keti for a biography of the Mai comes with ulterior motives. Thus, Mamo, in this book, squarely confronts Keti’s history in order to explode presumably stable notions such as greatness, culture and succession. We see him do this when he confronts the Waziri and declares “I am in a good position to see the shape formed by these disparate pieces... the more I researched, the more I discovered there is nothing to celebrate. All my book can do is the opposite” (p.283). Mamo’s painful discoveries of ‘truths’ do not start with the history of Keti but much earlier when he and his brother, LaMamo, discovered the truth about their parents, Lamang and Tabitha. Mamo’s life inevitably, is spent in the narration of history and discovering truths that are not only revealing but also painful.

History or the telling of stories keeps things and people alive, and in *Measuring Time*, Habila does not dryly recount events;



rather, his stories are felt through the medium of lived lives, of actual aching, sensitive, experiences. For Mamo and LaMamo, it was the stories that their aunt Marina told that brighten their childhood days. Mamo tells us how the stories captivate his imagination in these words, “Aunty Marina saved me from early death; she taught me how to live... she did this in a very simple way. She was a magician, a witch with words. She could conjure up mountains and undersea kingdoms with words. I stayed alive from day to day just to hear her next story” (p.18). History, therefore, on one hand has the dual purpose of revealing undesired truths, while on the other hand, it gives life, hope and a sense of being and worth. The church drama group in Keti village presents a play every year at Christmas. It is the same play year in, year out – the story of the arrival in 1918 of the village’s first missionary, the Reverend Drinkwater. They approach the performance with the enthusiasm of a new discovery, and each year the audience applauds and cheers with undiminishing enthusiasm (p.34). Concerning the drama, Habila (2007) says:

And when the new thespians donned their prosthetic faces and tried to look like Drinkwater, there was more satire than celebration, as if they were saying to him: We know something you didn’t know, something you couldn’t know. And so each generation would bring to this play its own interpretation. (p.321)

What was it that the people of Keti knew that the Rev Drinkwater did not and could not know? They knew of their origins, they knew about their capabilities, they knew the truth that no lie could suppress. History might encompass a lot of things or issues but we should not forget that it is really all about people and who they are.

### 3.2 Culture and Tradition

For this paper, culture refers to a set pattern of human activity within a society or social group and the symbolic structures that give such activity significance for example, their customs, laws, dress, architectural designs, social standards, and religious beliefs. Defining culture in his book *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*, Walter Rodney (1976), opines that “culture is a total way of life. It embraces what people ate and what they wore; the way they walked and the way they talked; the manner in which they treated death and greeted the new-born, obviously unique features came into existence in virtually every locality with regard to all social details” (p.41). Thus, a people’s identity is tied to their custom and tradition, as much as it is tied to their history. Habila, in the process of examining the place of history in a people’s existence and life, inevitably examines the place of custom and tradition in *Measuring Time* and avers that people should not accept things as regards to custom and tradition at face value (p. 83). Habila’s preoccupation with how culture is used or manipulated here has nothing to do with the challenging of stereotypes as the ones Edward Said (1994), describes as:

The notions about bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric peoples, the disturbingly familiar ideas about the flogging or death or extended punishment being required when ‘they’ misbehave or became rebellious, because ‘they’ mainly understood force or violence best; ‘they’ were not like ‘us’. And for that reason deserved to be ruled. (pp:xi-xii)

Rather, Habila is questioning the wrongful veneration and use of culture by the people in authority to control and dominate the ruled and in the process, he enlightens the people on the need to rise up and throw off cultural subjection. Using Mr. Iliya as his mouth piece, he declares as follows, “The



worst thing you can do is to ever accept anything at face value. Don't agree with what a man says because he has lived longer than you or because he claims that is our way using history as evidence to back his claim" (p. 83). And because there is no such thing as a static culture or people, what one does with history and with culture and tradition is important and cannot be overemphasised. History, culture and tradition should be used logically and intelligently and it is in this context that Habila says "If you want to follow tradition, follow it because you understand it, not because one man told you it is our way. The youth must be encouraged to ask, why is it our way?"(p.83). The point Habila advances here advocates the need to challenge previously held notions and ways of seeing things in regards to culture because culture is dynamic, constantly evolving and being transformed especially in this era of globalization.

The foundation, on which most societies are built on and defined by, is tied to culture, making culture a source of identity. Thus, a society's defining elements both positive and negative are tied to its culture. In agreement with Said's (1994) argument that, "culture is a sort of theatre where various political and ideological causes engage one another" (p.xiv), it is this papers argument that a point Habila also makes in regards to culture is that it should be a planned process; one which should, above all emphasis valuable continuities in a people's life. Culture should also be expanded and renewed through the act of combining a mixture of ideas and breakthroughs rather than being left unchanged. It, thus, goes without saying that those aspects of our cultures and traditions, which are now irrelevant and archaic, should be allowed to die natural deaths instead of using them as tools of oppression especially,

as anything that has a place and relevance in any society should not only last but also outlive the people.

Helon Habila, in *Measuring Time* advocates a need for education as leverage against those people who, in spite of the irrelevance and uselessness of certain customs and tradition, insist on propagating such. Concerning this group, Habila has stated that "When you examine the motive behind most customs and their champions today, you will see that they are rigged to serve the interest of some self-styled custodian of our culture" (p. 84). He then warns that one should "Be wary of those who try to exclude. The truth is complex and various. Exclusion is never the answer" (p. 84). Habila has also argued that culture and tradition usually put one in that place where you are unable to question the actions of those that are in authority. A key character in *Measuring Time* Lamang has indeed gone so far as to say that, "In Africa the traditional system and our respect for elders has made us not to question the right of those in office to loot and steal" (p. 133). This it seems is the reason why those in authority usually choose to propagate only those aspects of the custom that suit their purposes. They take what is bad in the traditional system and use it to keep the people down (p. 133). This tendency for those in authority, to rationalise and articulate their views and entrench it, is equally commonplace in colonial relations where requiring legitimacy, the colonial power would often invent a 'tradition' which they could use to legitimise their own position. We are confronted with an example of this in the instance where Mr Graves, the colonial officer, in Keti installs Bol Dok as the Mai because it suited his purposes, even though traditionally Bol Dok was banished from Keti and notwithstanding the crudity of the method involved, was not supposed to be



back or to hold any position in governance (p. 201).

#### 4. Conclusion

Helon Habila argues in *Measuring Time* that history, culture, and tradition, for all intents and purposes, define who a people are and should therefore be a uniting force rather than being tools to be used as divisive and repressive instruments. Indeed, he portends that there is a lot to learn from history, but once it is distorted, it loses value and meaning and whereas history should be unalterable, and not distorted or exaggerated to serve ulterior aims of individuals, culture and tradition may be changed to suit the needs of the times seeing that change is a natural process in life. Culture and tradition are, he insists, integral to the values of society, and should not be manipulated to serve selfish ends. This is the truth of culture that the people of Keti have understood. Habila tells us this is the reason behind the resilience and flexibility of the Keti people as a community, therefore, the people “were celebrating because they had the good sense to take whatever was good from another culture and add it to what was good in theirs...that was their wisdom, the secret of their survival”(p.320).

#### About the Author

Juliet Tenshak is a Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Jos, Nigeria. She is presently, a PhD student at the University of Stirling in the U.K from where she is writing up her thesis on Contemporary Nigerian fiction. Her major areas of teaching and research interests include: African Literature, Contemporary Nigerian Fiction, and The Use of English on which she has written, presented and published various articles.

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