

Games, tradition and 'Being Human' in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers*

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In the era of transnationalism and globalisation it is easy to be drawn into totalising paradigms about what it means to be human which erase alternative ways of thought. It is therefore instructive to revisit Ayi Kwei Armah's postcolonial critique in order to question our assumptions about human activities such as the Olympic Games and general health practices. Armah reveals ways of thinking in precolonial times which may have been forgotten and which could assist the West in finding a balance in the way we live and treat our environment.

Keywords: Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Healers*, humanity, games, sports, healing practices, culture, linguistics

Introduction

The question 'what makes us human?' can be looked at in a number of different ways. I am going to focus on the activity of 'playing games' and ask whether that is something that makes us human. Secondly, I would like question the assumption that playing competitive games is a universal human activity. I will do this by seeking a different paradigm within which to describe this human activity; in particular I will be looking at the novel *The Healers* to illustrate an example of a writer who points towards an alternative African tradition of games.

Play and competition

Joseph Meeker points out that, 'playing' is not something that is exclusive to humans. He sees humans as simply another species of mammal: 'We mammals, along with the birds, have been playing and living comic lives for two hundred million years. There is no need to learn how to play, for that knowledge is deeply embedded in our bones and genes' (Meeker 1997: 104).

Play takes different forms in the animal world. It is sometimes merely playful, for example, where otters take turns sliding down a mud bank into a pool. 'It is a sign of normalcy and health in many young animals, and several species, including our own, are capable of lifelong play' (Meeker 1997:10). However, 'play' can take the form of a contest where animals fight to obtain dominance in a territory. Young animals practise this 'mock-fighting' until at the adult stage they are able to fight seriously and win or lose a contest.

Playing games in the human world has also followed this pattern. It has increasingly become a serious activity. Meeker writes that many humans have lost the ability to play because in Western culture the tragic tradition has to some extent crushed the impulse to play. The Protestant work ethic also sees 'play' as something to be banished in order to prosper and this has diminished the spontaneity of play (Meeker 1997: 105).

Playing games has become formalised in cultural traditions such as the Olympic Games, which originated in the pre-Christian era in Greece, where the idea of competition is paramount. With regard to human culture, Meeker notes that 'Play is a universal human language that can cross cultural and linguistic boundaries' (1997:10). This is certainly evident at the Olympic Games today, where nationalistic rivalries and individual prowess are dominant.

African traditional games

Each culture has its particular tradition of games; I will look briefly at a few of the African traditions. Looking back in time we see that there is a strong tradition of Board games. According to Anouk Zylma (2012), 'Board games have been played in Africa for thousands of years ... One of the oldest known board games in the world is *Senet* from Egypt ... *Mancala* is an African board game that is played worldwide (it is also known as *baob*, *oware*, *ayo*, *omweso*, *enkeshui* or *aweeet*). There are in fact more than 200 versions of this "count and capture" game, played throughout Africa (Zylma 2012). These games traditionally used materials from nature such as seeds and stones, but now the sets of board games can be obtained through *Amazon*, a significant indication of globalisation and transnationality. Board games, however, fall into a different category to games where a number of competitors take part in an event, especially one involving different nationalities.

There are many other traditional African games, such as stick-fighting and jumping or skipping games, but it is not my object to give a comprehensive picture of these games here. My main focus is a literary one, and it is based on the novel mentioned above.

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All Africa games

The African counterpart to the Olympic Games is the All Africa Games, which was first held in Congo Brazzaville in 1965 (Chikaforafrica 2011). In an essay entitled 'Waiting for the Ubuntu Games' we read, 'It is an established fact that international games create a shared feeling of oneness among participants, enabling them to forge a common bond in the face of weightier political or economic issues (Chikaforafrica 2011:1) According to this writer, the European colonists opposed the idea of a Pan African Games when it was first discussed in 1928 as they saw it as a precursor to African Independence Movements. His argument is that although the All Africa Games now take place every four years, it is not a distinctively African event: 'there is nothing intrinsically African in the nature of the sports competed for in the All Africa Games' (Chikaforafrica 2011:2) Sports such as football, volleyball, basketball and athletics are 'residues of the European colonial heritage'(Chikaforafrica 2011:2). The official languages spoken at these games are French and English, further emphasising the neo-colonial dependence on Europe. This writer deplores the lack of authentic African traditions in these Games.

Chinua Achebe and games

In an attempt to explore this question further, I now turn to African writers, as my essential focus in this paper is a literary one. The first writer is the famous Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe (Achebe 1953) in his novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Here we see that wrestling was a common sport in pre-colonial Nigeria. We remember Okonkwo, the hero, being a champion wrestler as he even threw 'The Cat', someone who obtained this nickname because opponents could never get his back to touch the ground. Prowess in wrestling was one of the things that made Okonkwo famous. He was a respected leader in his community. Achebe therefore seems to affirm the value of wrestling matches in that society.

Ayi Kwei Armah and games

However, a more complex attitude towards wrestling and competitive games in general is exhibited by Ayi Kwei Armah from Ghana. His novel also begins with a wrestling match which is part of the games that are held every year in the community of Esuano. Armah describes each wrestler in detail. One of the more terrifying characters is a giantlike person, Buntui. His limbs are enormous and heavy, his skin is an unattractive light reddish colour and his neck seems to be broader than his head. His muscles 'pushed hard against the skin, as if the covering it provided were not sufficient ... As the giant stood now, his body seemed near to exploding. Every muscle bulged with some huge, uncontrollable tension' (Armah 1978:9) The different components of Buntui's body seem to be at war with each other as a result of the tension inside him.

In contrast, Armah describes his main character in the novel, Densu. The difference in tension seems to be the most striking feature of this man. He is described as being full of grace: 'His build was slender. His skin was black, with a suggestion of depth and coolness in its blackness. The youth stood perfectly straight, without any effort to do so. There was no tension in any part of his body. When he moved, no matter how small the motion, it seemed to start somewhere deep in his being, and to involve the rest of his body, all of it, in a gentle, hardly perceptible wave of energy' (Armah 1978:10). There is a sense of harmony in his movements which also give the impression of effortless motion.

Before the wrestling starts, the judge explains that the sign of defeat is to raise an arm, index finger pointing upward. The opponent would then have to release him as he had won the round. Before they even begin, Densu raises his arm. The judge is astounded, hardly believing that he concedes defeat before even beginning. But Densu confirms that he doesn't wish to fight. He does it in a very relaxed, calm way – 'beyond both humility and arrogance' (Armah 1978:11). When he is questioned about his withdrawal he simply says 'I don't like fighting for no reason' (Armah 1978:13). However, we see that when he sees a reason to fight, he wins easily. This happens when his friend Anan fights the giant. Even when Anan gives the signal of defeat, the giant doesn't let him go and continues to strangle him. The judge cannot stop him, but Densu springs up and strikes the giant (Buntui) on the neck so that he releases his victim and then wrestles with him to immobilise him. His friend points out that Buntui could have won without killing him, and Densu replies: 'I doubt it,' ... 'Buntui has a huge body, and such a tiny brain to control it' (Armah 1978:17).

Thus Armah values a balance between mind and body; a balance which brings it into a unity of action. He also points out the dangers inherent in martial-type sports. They imitate fighting to the death and sometimes the competitors forget that it is a game. However, the writer does also give a positive reason to take part in wrestling matches. This is provided through Densu's friend Anan. He says that he was happy when he had to fight Buntui because of his curiosity: 'the thing that makes me happiest is getting to know something I didn't know before' (Armah 1978:18). He wanted to know whether he could deal with all the strength that Buntui had. It is important to note that Anan's motive is not related to winning or losing as such, but rather to knowledge.

As in the Olympics, there were running races as well at Esuano. Densu came second in all the short races, following the prince, Appia who 'ran with a firm explosive power of movement' (Armah 1978:34). Densu won the long races as his running 'also had power in it' but it had 'had a natural, unhurried smoothness that was a pleasure merely to look at' (Armah 1978:34). His movements seem to be 'a joy to him'. An interesting thing about the way Armah describes Densu is that he shows a relationship between Densu and his environment; between the human and the nonhuman: 'Densu ran as if air and earth both listened to him, and were happy to help him pass' (Armah 1978:35). This suggests that he is entirely in harmony with the natural environment.

Similarly, when it comes to the swimming races, Densu's movements contrast markedly with those of his competitor: 'Appia thrashed the river with undiminished power; Densu's limbs barely broke the surface as they left and re-entered the water, drawing it back for the smoothly gliding body to slip through' (Armah, 1978:40, 41). The difference is that Densu does not battle against the river but seems to become part of it. During the longest race we read: 'one form glided forward and away from the others in a series of long, smooth, sliding thrusts, as if some force beneath, subtle but strong, were buoying it up and easing it forward ahead of everyone. The form was Densu's' (Armah 1978:42) There seems to be a partnership between Densu and the water; a sense of co-operation with the natural environment which the other swimmers lack. It is suggested that this is because Densu is swimming for the joy of feeling the water around him, not in order to win the competition.

The climax of the competition is when the three best competitors have to shoot live pigeons in order to decide on the winner of the Games. Densu deliberately misses the bird and shoots the string that traps the bird so that it can go free. Symbolically, he frees the captive pigeon at the cost of gaining a victory for himself and a chance to wield power in society.

Thus Armah constructs a criticism of competitive sports through the medium of Densu. Even though he takes part in the sports, he is ambivalent about them. He had watched them from the time when he was a child and knew he would at some stage take part in them, but is disturbed by their meaning, which is not clear to him. He tries to find out how they originated by asking some of the old people.

The first reason for the games in the old days was to celebrate the struggles of the people. They had wandered around for a long time looking for a place to make their home and after a difficult period had reached their destination.

The second reason was to keep people together. 'They were not so much celebrations as invocations of wholeness' (Armah 1978:4). However, things had changed and the meaning of the games had become blurred as disunity crept into the community.

Densu felt the need for certain rituals. Young people, he felt, needed to be prepared for adult life. However, 'he felt no need to compete with those of his age. He felt no need to compete with anyone at all. He did not hate the games and the rituals. But he wished he had found rituals, and games that could satisfy the yearning inside him would have to be ceremonies, rituals, and games of co-operation, not of competition. The present games made him uneasy. Nothing they offered gave an answer to his soul.' (Armah 1978:39)

In opposition to the position taken up by Densu we have Ababio, his guardian. Ababio's presence is like a sinister undercurrent during the games. He tries to manipulate Densu to take part in the wrestling match and all the other events as he wants him to win the games. The reason for this is a power struggle. Ababio has a 'hidden agenda'. He wants to seize power from Appia, who is next in line in the succession of the king of Esuano, and put Densu in his place, as his puppet. He connects the games with the power to rule Esuano. Also, he plans to betray his people and to side with the whites who he sees as more powerful than the indigenous people of the land. In his opinion, it is better to align yourself with the most powerful side. We see that Ababio is playing a much bigger game than the sports which are taking place. In this game the prize is the control over the whole of Ghana.

Games and colonialism

Here a quick aside on the history of Ghana may be necessary. There was an ancient kingdom of Ghana which was far to the north-west of present-day Ghana, where this narrative is set. European powers such as the Portuguese, the Dutch and the Danish took turns in building forts and so obtaining a stronghold in the coastal town of Cape Coast. This used to be called the Gold Coast and trade was lucrative. Later the British took control of the coast and then systematically went to war with the Asante in order to control the inland area as well. There were five Asante wars before the Asante were eventually defeated. Much of the conquest was due to internal divisions between the different indigenous groups in Ghana. It was this lack of unity that led to the colonial domination of the British (Shillington 1989). Ababio in this novel is the epitome of this division.

However, Armah also constructs a positive force for unity in the novel, whose power lies in healing: Damfo. He lives in the forest and his ideas and way of life inspire Densu. [Armah divides his characters into two camps: the manipulators and

the Inspirers.] The inspirers allow people to make up their own minds if they want to be led by them and the manipulators trick people into following them. They never try to persuade them openly.

Healing and unity

Damfo's philosophy on healing is based on unity. He says: 'Healing an individual person – what is that but restoring a lost unity to that individual's body and spirit?' (Armah, 1978:82). He sees health and unity as being the same thing: 'there's health when everything that should work together works together. Take the single person. If body and soul are working together the mind thinks: I should do this; the will decides: I will do it; the muscle tenses itself to help the will; and the hand does what the mind has thought. Everything works together.' This is the type of health that Densu exemplifies in his movements and actions during the games. It is therefore natural that he is drawn to Damfo in the hope that he might learn from him about healing and help him in his work.

Damfo's healing work is not confined to the healing of the individual, however. Ultimately his aim is the unity of the black people in the land: 'The ending of all unnatural rifts is healing work. When different groups within what should be a natural community clash against each other, that also is disease. That is why healers say that our people, the way we are now divided into petty nations, are suffering from a terrible disease' (Armah 1978:83) The plotting of Ababio to divide the community is directly in conflict with Damfo's healing work.

The competitiveness of the games is seen as the first step towards division in the community. This is partly because the people who are not playing become passive spectators. Densu's view is that being a passive spectator is reducing one's humanity. He would prefer to see everyone joining in and participating in the activity:

In his imagination he could see different rituals. In them it was not necessary to set apart a few active ones to run against each other, and to reduce the whole community to spectators. There would be no competitors, only participants. There would be a community whose members would be free to work together in the cool of the morning; they would be free to run, swim, jump, play, to celebrate health and strength in the late afternoon; they would dance to their own songs in the quiet of evenings. These things were good. Why should any of them be turned into competitions? What sense was there in excluding the whole community from the centre of the field, leaving only a few grim battlers? Why should everything have to end in a senseless victory for one isolated individual? What meaning could such a ritual give the community, turning it as it did into a defeated mass, all worshipping a lone victor?' (Armah 1978:39)

Games and power

The last part of this quotation, 'turning [the community] into 'a defeated mass, all worshipping a lone victor' is an inherently unstable configuration because a 'defeated mass' is liable to be manipulated by whoever is placed at the apex of the hierarchy: the lone victor. Being worshipped by the mass, he would have great power and therefore he would be able to manipulate the masses for his own purposes. Instead, a situation where everyone participates in the games results in a more balanced configuration: one that is stable and 'healthy' as they would not be held in the thrall of a 'lone victor.' A different kind of play would result in a different paradigm for the functioning of society.

Conclusion

Armah's contrasting views about play and games can be related to those of Joseph Meeker. He uses the terms finite and infinite play, referring to another writer, Carse: "A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play." Finite games, in other words, are those played for the purpose of ending the game with a victory or a defeat. These are contests, and are familiar to us in the form of wars, most sporting events, politics as usual, business dealings, and the ordinary competitiveness of daily life (Meeker 1997:17). On the other hand, in an infinite game, 'the only purpose of the game is to prevent it from coming to an end, and to keep everyone in play' (Meeker 1997:17). Meeker points out that 'most games are not playful' and that 'play exists for its own sake, and seeks no goals and objectives beyond itself' (Meeker 1997:18).

The negative effects of competitive games are ruled out by play, according to Meeker: 'During play, all players are equal. If there are inequities of power, weight, agility, or age, they must be offset by handicapping the stronger player ... There are no playful tyrants, and no tyrannical players' (Meeker 1997:18).

The notion of non-competitive 'play' proposed by Armah is therefore endorsed by Meeker, who sees 'play' as one of the highest forms of behaviour, which functions as a mode of survival.

In conclusion, we may return to the questions raised at the beginning of this essay about the All African Games. Armah does not give the answers to the questions posed by the writer who called for distinctively African games. Instead, Armah goes much further by questioning the paradigm of competitive sport as a whole.

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