
The Context and Cultural Significance of Ikpeaja Bard of Ụmụawụlụ Igbo

BY

Eze Eucharía ANENECHUKWU, Ph.D
Department of Linguistics & Communication Studies
University of Port Harcourt

ABSTRACT

Oral performance is an art in which the artist appears physically before his audience while celebrating his speech art. Ikpe-aja bard, like all other artists are the custodians of the society's tradition and culture and stands as model to the people. This work is a research on the Ikpe-aja bards of Otu-Ofu-Obi of Ụmụawụlụ Igbo in South East Nigeria. It is aimed at unraveling the theme, context and cultural significances of this performance. The work uses a descriptive survey research design in the analysis of the data collected and the theoretical framework adopted is the ethnopoetic theory, an interdisciplinary construct which attempts to correct the Eurocentric and chirographic bias of the European literary artists against non-western oral literary texts which fail to recognize the fact that aesthetic standards are not universal. The findings of the research reveal that oral literary artist are mirrors through which virtues and vices are unveiled. They have taken the place of Newspapers to comment on current affairs and to reflect public opinions. The study, therefore, recommends that frantic efforts should be made by the policy makers to ensure that the need for people to go into their traditions and fish out their different vital hidden indigenous genres that constitute the oral literature of their tradition should be included in the National Policy on Education.

KEY WORDS: Context and Cultural Significance, Sorrowful Occasion, Ikpeaja Bard of Ụmụawụlụ Igbo

Introduction

Poets, right from Plato's time were reckoned God's voice, such that what they say was final. From the time immemorial, the poet has always been a crusader of note in social criticism. They give praise where necessary and regarded as the voice of the voiceless Kato (1998). They are seen as catalysts that stir up the people from their docility and indifferences to socio-political problems of their times. They try to influence the people to find a way of bringing an end to abuse of power and privileges.

Ìkpe-ajá is known for their Satire (Ìkpe) and Praise (Òjijá). Literature, whether oral or written is known to have a very powerful tool of Satire with which to correct, by ridiculing the ills and satirical butts in the society and by praising noble characters who rise above individual foibles. Ikpe-aja derives its name from the nature of its performance. Ìkpe and Òjijá has been shortened and combined to form Ikpaja.

Ikpaja is derived from Ìkpe (Satirise) and Ija mma (Praise). The performance, therefore, satirizes as well as praises. It is aimed at discouraging vices and upholding virtues. Thus in Ikpaja performance, delinquent character is ridiculed and the great achiever who by his actions recorded some achievements without disturbing the social equilibrium, the poet has some words of praise to unleash on him. Through this, he is shown some appreciation that his life has been led according to the accepted pattern of behaviour.

The membership of Ikpaja performance is restricted to adults, and it is an exclusive reserve for the male folk within the age limit of twenty-five. The Ikpaja performance and other African performances are judged as spring boards for entertainment Enekwe, (1995:5). The study of Ikpaja performance is tailored towards x-raying the society, commenting on current affairs and reflecting on peoples' opinion.

Theoretical and Empirical Justification

Theoretical Framework

The most appropriate framework that best situates this work is the ethnopoetic theory. One of the proponents of this theory is Tedlock (1983), an American researcher who discovered that most translations of Native American oral traditions are inadequate because they failed to capture the power and beauty of the oral performance on the written page. According to him, these translators often turn these poems into western poetic styles and references familiar to western ears but not necessarily present in the poem in its native language. They equally fail to take into account the context, voice, gesture, movement and other ritual elements of a text and to recognize that aesthetic standards are not universal. Ethnopoetic therefore, is an interdisciplinary construct introduced into oral literary analysis to correct these Eurocentric biases against non-western literary genres by deriving an appropriate interpretative frame of discourse in its own cultural context. In this framework, texts are analysed in their original language and context to discover how individual elements function within the cultural performance of that text.

This model also stresses that oral qualities in performance are central to the organization of speech. In the words of Mills (1991:25), "...they convey to the listener a sense of the relative importance of propositions and their connections with each other which are essential aspects of meaning".

Empirical Study

Mbuda (2003) studies satire in birth songs of Oku women of Cameroon. The objective is to find out the classification of satiric elements embedded in the songs. She uses seventeen birth songs as her data and finds out that satire for sexual misconduct, family disunity, negligence, irresponsibility, stinginess and stealing abound among birth songs of Oku women. She discovers among other things that since the Oku people regard love making as a purposeful act of procreation, individuals who neglect their social responsibilities and engage in sex just for pleasure should be brought to book through public exposition.

Okorongwu (2006) also conducts a study on the satiric songs of Ishiagu people of Ebonyi State. In her classification of these songs, she discovers that a man who is not strong enough to impregnate a woman is always seen appearing unhappy, lazy and lacks much care for the family. Moreover, Onyejekwe and Ikeokwu (2013) also study *Á gbachaa é kurú nwa oral* performance of Mbaïse Igbo. The study takes a critical appraisal of the oral songs composed and performed by the women of Mbaïse for social commitment using the functionalist approach. They identified several themes in the songs, one of which is a theme of satire, which raises alarm on the rate at which people get rich overnight, an indication of the existence of one of the societal ills of using human beings for money rituals. This act, among others, they say should be abhorred in the society.

Nnamani (2014) also studies the role of folk music in traditional African society with particular reference to Igbo land. He identifies the different functions which folk music play in Igbo land, particularly in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State. He discovers that in Ezeagu, the announcement of the birth of a child is sometimes encoded in the number of songs or calls made by the paternal grandmother, if alive, otherwise any oldest female relation of the parents. He goes further to note that the sex of the baby is often not announced directly but is encoded in reference to tools or trade depending on the prevailing occupation in the locality. Climbing rope (Igbu akwu) he says, would refer to a male child while broom (aziza) or trading basket would refer to a female child.

Data Presentation

Contexts and Cultural Significances of Ikpeaja bard

Every oral performance falls within a particular context. It is the context that gives life to any given text of oral literature. Without context, oral literature remains lifeless. A context could either be secular or ritual.

Secular contexts are those socio-cultural events that call for the celebration of events, like marriage ceremony, child-outing, house warming, title taking, judgment of cases, politics, family affairs and a host of other social - cultural affairs deemed as the life style of a given people.

Ritual context involves such things as religious or magical activities like prayers, invocation, divination, sacrifices e.t.c. In most ritual contexts, proverbs, riddles and anecdotes are enacted in the expression of certain concepts and ideals. Uzochukwu (1985:106) testifies that Igbo literature, like the literature of other peoples, serves as social commentary on the society. In the form of proverbs, for example, the idea of live and let live is rendered as follows: “egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebena nku kwaa ya (live and let live). According to Uzochukwu in the incantations that accompany some Igbo rituals such as invoking the deity (igò arusi), the ancestral staff of authority and justice; (igò ofo); and the breaking of kola nut (iwa oji), the same concept of live and let live is easily traceable.

The Ikpeaja performance is effective in stimulating emotional, empathetic and sympathetic responses in the audience. Through the medium of praise and satire, the performers educate the society, and are thus seen as repositories of the peoples’ norm

Ceremonial Context: These are some of the ceremonies that provoke some particular kinds of oral poetry. Some of these occasions are joyful while some are sorrowful. Akajiaku (1986:113) says that in the life of the Igbo, traditional poetry features on many occasions. The occasion could either be joyful or sorrowful. Festive occasions evoke the emotion of joy and unleashes praises to the concerned while sorrowful occasions evoke the emotion of sorrow and satirises the vices of the concerned too.

Child Outing: This context performs some social - cultural functions. Child-outing is observed after omugwo. In some Igbo societies it takes two months, and in some, three. During child-outing, relations, friends, well-wishers, groups and associations are invited to join in the ceremony. During the celebration, happiness is said to be total. The women, in particular, use the occasion to re-enact the pains experienced during birth and the joy that follows on seeing the new baby delivered safely. All these are expressed through oral poetry. According to Kato (1998:3) “poetry champions the civilization of every community. Songs,

dances, chants, incantation etc. give us a peep into the world of others. Naswem (1998:4) avers that “the effects music has on the soul was likened to food as expressed by Shakespeare when he requested: “If music/poetry be the food of love, play on; give me excess of it; that forfeiting the appetite may sicken and so die...”. Through the oral poetry that goes with child-outing most women often fall into ecstasy having been transported to the height of sublimity. In this mood all forms of shame are thrown to the wind and taboo words reign during singing and dancing with which the new baby is herald. At this point, they live in fantasy and explore the world of fantasy thus living the kind of life (in words and deeds) which they dare not live in reality. The Ikpeaja uses the song below during celebration of child-outing

Cantor:	Kwenu o shi nka a	Cantor:	Echo he is from where
Refrain:	O shi nka a	Refrain:	He is from here
Cantor:	Kwenu o shi n’ikpu	Cantor:	Echo he is from vagina
Refrain:	O shi n’ikpu	Refrain:	He is from vagina
Cantor:	ozọ Ebeebe nwele ego	Cantor:	ozọ Ebeebe who is rich
Refrain:	O shi n’ikpu	Refrain:	He is from vagina
Cantor:	G. C. Igboamazu na-achi anyi	Cantor :	G. C. Igboamazu our king
Refrain:	O shi n’ikpu	Refrain:	He is from vagina
Cantor:	Okonkwo Nkala nwa Diishi	Cantor:	Okonkwo Nkala the District officer
Refrain:	O shi n’ikpu	Refrain:	He is from vagina

The above song is used to show the claim that women are more superior or supreme to men. The word Nneka (mother is supreme) also attests to this claim. They uphold that no matter how rich or well placed a man is in the society, the man, per se, came out from the vagina. As they sing and dance, they beat their hands on the region of their private part, signifying the origin of man from a common source. Similar songs in the above category are:

O meelu anyi mma	It has done well for us
Ayon bedi emeelu anyi mma	Iron bed has done well for us
Matiraasi biam-biam-biam	Mattress biam-biam-baim

The above text is a pure revelation of the secret behind child birth. It shows that no woman gives birth without bedding a man.

Afia e jili abani zu	Is carried out at night
Afia ikpu	The business of child birth
Afia e jili abani zu	Is carried out at night
Afia ikpu	The business of child birth
Afia ikpu	The business of child birth
Afia e jili abani zu	Is carried out at night
Afia ikpu	The business of child birth

From the above songs, the origin of a child is known (from virgins); the time of operation revealed (at night) and the place of the operation is disclosed (on a mattress). The above oral poetry performs social and educational functions. Ibli (1991:1) avers that “literature is an interesting aspect of human existence, especially in traditional society which do not have a writing culture. Man has always employed oral tales to recreate past individual family and communal experiences to his contemporaries and especially the younger segment of society”. It is evident that an illiterate makes nothing meaningful of written literature, but when it comes to oral literature, he is a composer of songs, music and dance, and therefore a choreographer (Kato, 1998:8).

The ikpaja performance also provides a text which only suggests the caliber of people that are expected to pay homage to a new-born child. The Igbo believe that a new-born child is holy, clean and a pleasurable gift from God. As such, the evil ones are not expected to visit the child as they are likely to dish out from their evil magicians. This is exemplified in the text below.

Iyo iyo iyo	Iyo iyo iyo
Iyoo o	Iyoo o
Jee nkiri ọ́nụ́ nnwa	Go and see a new born baby
Papa Bosco	Papa Bosco
Gị́ futa	Come out
Jee nkiri ọ́nụ́ nnwa	Go and see a new born baby
ọ́ga Dakoota	Sir Dakota
Gị́ futa	Come out
Jee nkiri ọ́nụ́ nnwa	Go and see a new born baby
Ndị́ na-egbu mmadu	Killers
Esokwana anyị́	Don't follow us
Jee nkiri ọ́nụ́ nnwa	To go and see a new born baby
Ndị́ na-ezu oshi	Thieves
Ha esokwana anyị́	Don't follow us
Jee nkiri ọ́nụ́ nnwa	To go and see a new born baby
Inyamooko	Inyamooko
G ị́ esokwana anyị́	Don't follow
Jee nkiri ọ́nụ́ nnwa	To go and see a new born baby
Igweego	Igweego
G ị́ esokwana anyị́	Don't follow us
Jee nkiri ọ́nụ́ nnwa	To go and see new born baby

The sayings “nwa bu ugwu” (child is dignity), “nwa bu ike” (child is strength), “nwa amaka” (child is good) “nwa kaego” (child is greater than money) X-ray how dearly the Igbo people cherish and value a child.

Sorrowful Occasion

This is exemplified in their study of the societal feelings about certain societal ills prevalent in Ụmụawụlụ and how the Ikpaja bard as members of the society use their oral performance to x-ray such ills. One of such ills is stealing otherwise known as rogue, an ill that inflicts sorrow not only to the immediate family but to the members of the society. A rogue according to Hornby (1963:856) is regarded as vagabond, scoundrel, rascal etc. as human beings, they are (equally) the *main* actors in the drama of existence and life (Nwala, 1985:41). The society looks at these calibre of people as “*odi ndu onwu ka, mma*” (living that is worse than death — alive but dead) because they are physically existing but are ineffective. Certain aphorisms attest to the ineffectiveness or use— lessness of rogues. The saying “*onye matalu onye oshi anaha anaba lahu*” (parents of rogues sleep with their eyes open.), “*kama oshi ka m yoba ayiyọ*” (rather than steal let me be a begger, “*Oshi lulu ngwulu*” (stealing defies a family). This can be seen in the excerpts below.

The repetition “*na ghi ehohe akpu*” (that you did not uproot cassava) and “*na ghi egwuho ji*” (that you did not dig yam) re implored to express emphasis and to get them registered in the mind of the culprit. The lines “*Ọ bu akpu holu Onwie e*” (Is it *cassava*. that uprooted itself?) and “*O bu ji gwulu onwie e?* (Is it yam that dug itself?) are rhetorical questions because they leave no time for the addressee to respond. The questions only convey information rather than trying to elicit new or Stealing of farm crops are seriously frowned at in the entire Igbo community. Man depends on the soil for *his* survival. He plants assorted kinds of food crops with which to sustain his life and that of his family. It *is*, therefore, seen as a big offence for one to dig out or uproot such crops meant for the sustenance of life. This is *aru* (abomination) which according to Osuagwu (1989:55) is the highest crime a man can commit.

Na ghi ehohe akpu
Na ghi ehohe akpu
Ọ bu akpu holu onwie e
Mhii.

That you did not uproot cassava
That you did not- uproot cassava
Is it cassava that uprooted itself?
Mhii

Na ghi egwuho ji.
Na ghi egwuho ji
O bu ji gwulu onwie e?
Mhii

That you did not dig yam
That you did not dig yam
Is it yam that dug itself?)

Unknown information (Jackson, 1982:11)

Baloova dobeelu m ọgu
Dobeelu m ọgu
Dobeelu m ọgu mu u
Ọ ọ kwa ghi weelu ọgu

Balover keep my hoe
Keep my hoe
Keep my hoe for me
Are you not the one

Mu m na—achọ ọ?
Ami gbata ọsọ
Na o kpekwee

Who stole my hoe?
Army run to the rescue
I has happened

Mbedeele bjakwa dulu
Igweego
Na Igweego ezugbugwo anyi

Mbedeele come and pick
Igweego
Igweego has finished us

O zugbugwo anyị.	Igweego is a thief
O lugbugwo anyị n'ụlụ u	She has made us to suffer
Ihe bụ abacha dị n' Ọmacha	All our cassava in Ọmacha
Igweego avuchagwoie n' ụlụ	Igweego has stolen them
O vulu futa a	After stealing
O je zobie ebe ọ na—ezo	She hides it
Wee na—ashị chi oye ya fobe	And prays for the dawn of oye market
Chi oye ya fobe	Dye market come
Chi oye ya fobe	Oye market come
Chi oye fo	In Oye market day
Igweego evulu abachia futa	Igweego will come up with the cassava
Mhii	Mhii
Je lee ya ọgụ ego na ise	And sells it twenty—five pounds
Ka ọ wee nūbaalu anyị shiga a	with which she smokes cigarette
Ọ na—arushi shiga a	As she smokes
Ọ na — atanụ anụ na mgbata	She eats meat so lavishly
Igweego	Igweego
I na – emekwe na ị ya - adi	Do you think you will survive all these?)

The above texts were composed during the Nigerian — Biafran war (1967 — 70). The period of the war was a period of severe hunger to Biafrans. “A major aspect of this war, which everybody has talked about is the question of starvation... in fact, the danger is greater along this line (starvation) than along the line of enemy weapons” (Ojukwu 1969:67). The above excerpt shows why the ikpaja bards concentrated their oral poetry on the deviants who stole the peoples’ food Crops.

The people of Ụmụawụlụ in particular and Igbo in general take any woman smoking cigarette as ‘efureefu’ (useless person). For Igweego, she was not only a thief, but in addition a chain smoker and a squandermaniac; hence the satire. The invitation of soldiers by the ikpaja bard to come and punish Balover for stealing a hoe is a pointer to the fact that the text was composed during the war. This time, the members of civil defence, the community chief and his council, and the age grades carried administrative functions while the soldiers were known for punishing the deviants more severely.

Conclusion

Ikpaja bard serve as a springboard for societal changes as they are the watchdogs of the people who speak on a large spectrum of what constitutes the people’s way of life. They praise virtues, satirise vices and serve as news peddlers. They use songs to comment on current affairs and reflect public opinion. Ikpaja poets celebrate their verbal arts on myriads of contexts – joyful and sorrowful. Each of the occasions evokes the desired emotion. They are the people’s mouthpiece through which people transmit information, narrate their experience, give vent to their feelings and correct erring members of the public.

There is no god associated with Ikpaja performance as it is in the practice with Ijala chanters of Oyo (Awonoor, 1975:91), and the Egbenuoba of Amaobia who believe in particular spirits which they consistently appease in order to protect them from the spirits or souls of the big

animals they killed hunting against them in revenge. The composers of Ikpaja songs claim to be misfired during composition.

Recommendations

The texts of the Ikpaja performance have been pinned down on the pages of this work. But it has to be said straight away that any oral literature subjected to writing has lost its validity and usefulness. How will the musical accompaniments that usually go with oral performance be committed to writing? What about the aesthetic devices vis-à-vis the paralinguistic features like the raising of hands, blinking of the eyes, smiling, first clenching and a host of others? This work, therefore, recommends that a study on the paralinguistic aspects of this performance be carried out because Igbo oral poetry is mostly appreciated if watched live for in this scenario, the artists performance is more fully realized. Again, the study recommends that frantic efforts should be made by the policy makers to ensure that the need for people to go into their traditions and fish out their vital hidden indigenous genres that constitute the oral literature of their tradition should be emphasized and included in the national Policy on Education.

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