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SAM. UZỌCHUKWU



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ORAL POETRY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE IGBO EXAMPLE

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by

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

It may be necessary to start by elucidating the key terms or concepts in this lecture, namely, *oral poetry*, and *national development*. Oral poetry, as the name suggests, is “poetry composed in oral performance by people who cannot read or write. It is synonymous with traditional and folk poetry” (Lord, 1965:591). It may be pointed out that currently it is not proper to base the definition of oral poetry on the level of education or literacy because some types of oral poetry, for instance, the proverbs, are a living tradition, popular with the literate and the illiterate alike. Some Igbo scholars have more aptly observed that traditional verses are composed “according to the social (cultural or ceremonial) needs of the communities ... and according to the traditional form deriving from and indigenous to the communities. They have not been influenced in any vital sense by literary forms and techniques which have been introduced through formal education” (Egudu and Nwoga, 1971:1).

But the absence of “literary forms and techniques which have been introduced through formal education” does not in any way detract from the merits of oral poetry as a work of art, for oral poetry is imbued with deep thought or ideas and has the aesthetic qualities of good literature. It should also be noted that there is some relationship between oral and written or modern poetry in Igbo culture. Apart from the aesthetic use of language in both types of poetry, a modern poet makes use of traditional material; and an oral poet, like the modern poet, can comment copiously on current issues. Also, both types of poetry are functional and socially oriented as indeed are all forms of Igbo literature:

Since it draws heavily from traditional literature, creative literature in Igbo cannot afford the luxury of *art gratia artis*. The literature is fully involved in the Igbo milieu which bring it into being. It is equally involved with the wider Nigerian society and with man as a universal being (Emenanjo, 1986 :9).

It is this functional or utilitarian aspect of oral poetry that we are going to explore in this lecture, while at the same time having at the back of

our mind that the aesthetic aspect should not be lost sight of. This is because in spite of the fact that Igbo literature “cannot afford the luxury of *arts gratia artis*”, the aesthetic aspect is often central in all forms of art. At any rate, aestheticism and utilitarianism in art are often linked up together, for we do not talk of aestheticism in a vacuum as “the pleasure derived from reading poetry is generated not only by its artistry but also by the content” (Egudu, 1977:14).

In speaking of national development, emphasis has often been laid on the economic aspect expressed in monetary statistical figures. But unless this is related to the welfare of the people, to the provision of their basic needs, the nation cannot be said to be developed. This emphasis on human-oriented development is underscored by Ade-Ajayi (2000:17), quoting the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, 1962 :

Development is growth plus change. Change, in turn, is social and cultural as well as economic and qualitative as well as quantitative... The key concept must be improved quality of people’s life.

The human-oriented development discussed above can be termed the material component. To make it more realizable and enduring, there is need for the moral component which complements the material one:

To ensure that this human dimension of the essence of development is recognized and respected, there is the need for another component of development, namely, the moral component which should govern and direct the material component. It is a high-level moral development which compels a rational relationship between the wealth of a nation and the health (social, physical and moral) of the nation (Egudu, 2002:23-24).

The relevance of oral poetry lies in nurturing this relationship, for it helps to restrain people from anti-social acts which are detrimental to their general well-being, and by so doing creates a conducive environment

necessary for national development. This it does not through coercion but through persuasion, through teaching with delight which is derivable through the application of the utilitarian and aesthetic aspects of poetry. It has been pointed out that when compared with other disciplines in the arts, poetry is more efficacious in acting as a means of social control, thus creating the enabling atmosphere necessary for national development. This point is made by Daiches (1964:64) in reference to Sidney's *The Defence of Poesie* :

Poetry, Sidney claims, is superior as a moral teacher to both philosophy and history, because it does not deal with mere abstract propositions, as philosophy does, but with the concrete example, and as its examples are not tied to fact, it can make them more apt and convincing than anything found in history. The true nature of virtue is painted vividly and attractively, while vice, with equal vividness, is made to appear always ugly and unattractive.

In order to demonstrate how oral poetry fulfils the above role effectively, we shall have recourse to one form of oral Igbo poetry in the fixed-phrase genre, namely, the proverb. We shall also treat other forms of oral poetry in the free-phrase genre, which consists of poems composed in different contexts such as the rites of passage (birth, marriage, death), masquerade performances, and other festivities. These poems will be in any of the three recognized modes of delivery, namely, the song, the chant, and the recitation:

The main means of performance of oral poetry are through the singing, intoning (chanting), and spoken voice (recitation)... Certainly the singing voice is a very common medium (Finnegan, 1977:118) (my parenthesis).

Because of the multifarious nature of the corpus at our disposal, we are to do some forms of selection and limit ourselves, in the treatment of the free-phrase genre, to only three themes. We shall demonstrate how the themes of satire, praise, and admonition are relevant to the topic of our lecture.

2.0 THE FIXED-PHRASE GENRE : The Proverbs (*Ilu*)

With minor variations, dictated by localities, the Igbo proverbs, like the Igbo riddles, are relatively fixed in their wordings and other characteristic features. These features, in the view of Nwachukwu-Agbada (2002:136-179), include their briskness and pithiness occasioned by the omission of elaborate modifiers which may weigh down the meanings and undermine their memorability; the incidence of various forms of parallelism whose objective is to maintain balance. Other common features include the incidence of lexical matching, various forms of phonological repetition, the incidence of word play, ideophone and rhythm. In the light of these features, Nwachukwu-Agbada concludes as follows:

Our study of Igbo proverb form and style shows that Igbo proverbs belong to the realm of poetry. Igbo proverbs achieve artistic pleasure through the many poetic devices on which a majority of them is erected. In addition to structural repetition, there are alliteration, assonance, tonal counterpoint, tonal rhyme, word-play, ideophones and rhythm. These are terms usually associated with poetry in any tradition and, as we have shown, the Igbo proverb can be stylistically analysed using these poetic concepts. Furthermore, we have shown that figurative language and expression is applicable to Igbo proverb analysis. The implication of all these revelations about the relationship between Igbo proverbs and poetry is that while context helps in the realization of their meanings, they can also exist as independent poetic utterances appreciated in terms of their aesthetic features.

The controversy on whether the proverbs should be regarded as a form of oral poetry or prose stems from the fact that they are generally used in conversational situations within the context of prose and may consist of a single utterance of one or two lines. But judging from their literary qualities outlined above, the statement by Babalola (1974:35) on *owe*, the Yoruba proverbs, can be applicable to the proverbs of people from

various cultures : “What needs to be borne in mind to avoid this error of thought is that *owe* are poetic quotations within prose.”

2.1 Philosophical Content

In applying the Igbo proverbs as a means of social control, aimed at enhancing national development, we shall first of all demonstrate their philosophical content. In doing this, we shall have recourse to the options suggested by Momoh (2000:362) :

The first option is to consider a collection of a full load of the proverbs of an African people and discuss how philosophical or not each proverb is. Another option is to consider a handful of proverbs and examine them for the metaphysical, logical, moral and epistemological values... The third option... is to consider only proverbs that are in fact metaphysical principles... A metaphysical principle is a compendious and succinct, sometimes one-line, statement of a philosophical position...

We intend to adopt the second and third options in our analysis of the philosophical content of the Igbo proverbs. To do this, we have to quote some Igbo proverbs that are of special relevance to Igbo cherished values, and geared towards upholding Igbo cultural norms. We regard a statement as a proverb only when a deeper or universal meaning is suggested by or is derivable from the surface meaning (Ugonna, 1974:55). This deeper or universal meaning is usually in the form of an aphorism which is a general truth based on human experience or belief, couched in epigrammatic language devoid of metaphorical inference. It is this aphorism that can be equated with the metaphysical principle as defined above. It is at this level of analysis that the role of the proverbs as one of the agents of social control becomes more obvious.

2.2 Data and Analyses

Category A - Justice

1. *Egbe bere, Ugo bere ;*
Nke ̄ ibe ya ebena
Nku kwaa ya.

Let the Kite perch, let the Eagle perch;
Whoever says the other should not perch
Should have its wing broken.

2. *Oke amana ̄ uma ta akpa dibia,*
Ma dibia amana ̄ uma bu oke onu

Let not the rat deliberately gnaw away at the medicine-man's
bag,
Nor should the medicine-man deliberately curse the rat.

3. *O biara be onye ābiagbuna ya,*
O lawa mkpumkpu āpuna ya.

Let not the guest cause the death of the host,
Let not the host afflict the guest with hunch-back.

4. *Onye si m nwuo*
Ya buru okuko ̄uzo lakpuo ura.

Who wished my death
Should go to roost before the fowl.

5. *Onye isi m di mkpa n'iji chu aja*
Ya were nke ya chu.

Who finds my head suitable for sacrifice
Should start with his own.

6. *Onye si ubi m puo ero,
Nke ya puo ata.*

Who wished my farm should sprout mushroom
May his own sprout needle-grass.

7. *Ndu mmiri, ndu azu,
Mmiri atana, ma azu anwuna.*

Life-force to the stream, life-force to the fish,
Let not the stream dry, let not the fish die.

The metaphysical principle running through all the proverbs in category A is 'Live and let live' (*Biri ka m biri*) which carries the universal message of justice in all its ramifications. This message is so highly cherished by the Igbo that it can be regarded as the epitome of Igbo moral philosophical concept. It is because of this that the most widely used and highly cherished cult object in Igbo culture, namely, *Ofò* is employed as a symbol of justice. Ordinarily a branchlet of a tree of the same name, the potency of *Ofò*, and its being impregnated with supernatural powers take effect as soon as it is dedicated to the forebears with appropriate words by an *Ofò* elder who at the same time smears it with animal blood, mud, and feathers. The high regard the Igbo have for it is summarised below :

Ofò rituals give us deep insights into the customs and sets of values of the Igbo. Among the Igbo who are not yet tainted with Western sophisticated juridical system, *Ofò* is the ultimate source of justice. Here is also a society in which uprightness, wisdom and holiness are associated with age. These qualities make the elders worthy to commune with the powers and the ancestors. Perhaps it is not by accident that these elders are chosen to be the holders of *Ofò* since, if nature takes its normal course, they are those who are nearest to the ancestors (Uwalaka, 1996:3-4).



Fig. 1 : An *Ofo* Sacred Stick (Courtesy : F.C. Ogbalu, *Ilu Igbo* (1965))

Category B - Mutual Co-existence

1. *Aka nri kwọọ aka ekpe,
Aka ekpe akwọọ aka nri.*

As the right hand washes the left,
The left hand washes the right.

2. *Aka weta, aka weta,
O ju ọny.*

When one hand brings and the other supports,
The mouth is filled.

3. *Otu aka adighi, eke ngwugwu.*
One hand does not tie a parcel.

4. *A nyukoọ mmamiri onu*
O gboọ ufufu

Urinating together,
Causes urine to foam.

5. *Otu osisi anaghi eme oke ohia*

A tree does not make a forest

6. *Onye na-akpa soosọ ya*
Na-anwu ka okuko.

Who ferrets alone
Dies like the fowl.

7. *Gidigidi bu ugwu eze*

The stampede of the retinue is the pride of royalty.

The proverbs in Category B have the metaphysical principle of 'Unity is strength' (*Ndinotu bu ike*). This carries the universal message of mutual assistance or co-existence. The relevance of this in human relationship both in traditional and modern society is quite obvious. Any problem, no matter how difficult or weighty, can be resolved when all hands are on deck. It is this cultural trait that prompts the Igboman to engage in activities that justify his being regarded as 'his brother's keeper'.

The symbolic signification of mutual co-existence is the kolanut which the Igbo celebrate in their daily activities. While the different lobes of the kolanut symbolise individual struggle and the recognition of personal identity, the fact that these lobes cannot exist without the other and are held together by an invisible hand underscores the view that individually little can be achieved, but collectively we can achieve a lot.

Category C - Moderation

1. *O nweghi ihe a nuru nti chie.*

There is nothing heard that deafens the ear.

2. *O nweghi ihe anya huru gbaa obara*

There is nothing seen that causes the eye to bleed.

3. *Anu e gbubeghi bu anu amaghi ga-abo.*

Only the game that has never been killed is the game that can't be dissected.

4. *Ota-akwu anaghi akọ n'obodo*

The palm-nut chewer is never lacked in a town.

5. *A hugbeghi bu onye agu riri ji ya.*

What has never been seen is one whose yam is devoured by the lion.

The metaphysical principle of proverbs in Category C is, 'There is nothing new on earth' (*O nweghi ihe bu ihe ohuru n'uya*). This carries the universal message of moderation. When used on a joyful occasion, the proverbs emphasize the fact that one will not be carried away by excesses of joy for one's achievement or good luck. But used on a sorrowful occasion, say on the occasion of bereavement, material loss, or failure, they underscore the fact that one should not refuse to be consoled when in sorrow as what has happened is a common human experience. When in such a situation, the sorrowful or the aggrieved person should regard himself or herself only as one in the mainstream of humanity.

Category D - Hardwork

1. *Okukọ si na a bọọ abọo.*
E rie erie.

The fowl says that through ferreting,
Eating is feasible.

2. *Ahuhụ sị na ya amarala ka ọ ga-adi ya n'udummiri,*
Wee were okochi kpakoba nri ya.

The ant says it's aware of its plight in the rainy season,
And so has chosen to gather its victuals in the dry season.

3. *Onye were ututu tutuba,*
O tutujuo abọ ya.

If one starts to collect (victuals) from the morning
He succeeds in filling the basket.

4. *Ngana kpuchie ute,*
Agụụ ekpughee ya.

When sloth covers the mat,
Hunger uncovers it.

5. *Ukwu gbara apiti na-eri ihe oma.*

The leg soiled by mud enjoys good things.

6. *Aka e mere n'ala anaghi ala nkiti.*

The hand exerted on the soil never goes unrewarded.

7. *Nwata kwochaa aka,*
O soro ogaranya rie ihe.

A child that washes his hands clean,
Eats with the rich.

8. *Aka aja aja na-ebute onu mmanu mmanu.*

The soiled hand results in the oily mouth.

For proverbs in the above category, the metaphysical principle is, 'Labour before pleasure' (*A ruo aruo e were rie*). This carries the universal message of hardwork which leads to achievement on which the Igbo place much emphasis. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that of all the ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Igbo are among the most achievement-oriented. And to underscore this fact, just as they have the *Ofo* as a symbol of justice, the kolanut as a symbol of mutual co-existence, they have the *Ikenga* as the symbol of individual achievement, strength, and success :

Ikenga ... is an Igbo cult object representing the right hand with which a man cuts his way through the jungle of life, to success in this world and to blessedness in the company of the ancestors in the next (Afigbo, 2000:10).

A standard *Ikenga* usually has two upthrusting protuberances. These, according to some people, represent the horns of a ram meaning strength and power. At the right hand, the *Ikenga* may wield a machet with which man hacks his way through life, and at the left, it holds a human skull, symbolizing achievement, power and might, an indication that it is man's and duty to give protection to the citizenry. This was particularly the case in the days of internecine wars but is not of much relevance today. The combination of knife and skull epitomises the fulfilled man (Udechukwu, 1978:89-90).

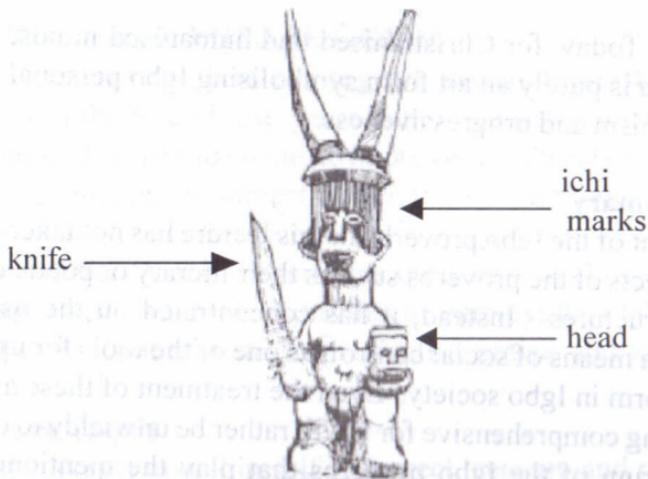


Fig. 2 : Ikenga figure carved by an artist from Agulū, Anambra State
(Courtesy: Ogbu Kalu (ed.), *African Cultural Development* (1982).

As a symbolic object, the *Ikenga* should ordinarily not generate any religious controversy. But occasionally this is not the case as was evident in 1999 when a serious controversy rocked the Imo *Ikenga* which was mounted at a major roundabout in Owerri, the state capital. Some residents argued that the *Ikenga* was fetish and should be removed from such a strategic point while others argued that it was merely a cherished work of art symbolising the achievements of the people and should therefore be retained. It is reassuring that in the raging controversy, some notable clerics saw the *Ikenga* as a symbolic and not a fetish object. This is typified in the following observation by the Catholic Archbishop of Owerri, A.J.V. Obinna, as recorded by Ahanihu (1999:10) :

In Igbo spiritual cosmology and anthropology, *Ikenga* stood for the art form in which the Igboman traditionally represented or symbolised his successful efforts or achievements, much as the degree certificate, the academic gown or the award plaque represents contemporary achievements. *Ikenga* speaks for Igbo creativity and productiveness much as genius speaks of brilliance and originality in a Roman or Greek. Once upon a time, *Ikenga* was seen in Igbo ritual or religious

term. Today, for Christianised and humanised minds, *Ikenga* is purely an art form symbolising Igbo personal dynamism and progressiveness.

2.3 Summary

The treatment of the Igbo proverbs in this lecture has not taken account of other aspects of the proverbs such as their literary or poetic qualities and their structures. Instead, it has concentrated on the use of the proverbs as a means of social control, as one of the tools for upholding the social norm in Igbo society. Even the treatment of these aspects is far from being comprehensive for it will rather be unwieldy to cover the entire spectrum of the Igbo proverbs that play the mentioned roles. Attention has, therefore, been focused on those proverbs that lend themselves easily to philosophical analysis based on our chosen criterion of metaphysical principle. These, as we have argued, have yielded the universal messages of justice, mutual assistance, moderation and finally hardwork which leads to achievement in life. These messages are an indication that proverbs, or indeed oral poetry of which the proverbs are a sub-genre, can be an agent for national development. It is where these norms are cherished and upheld that there is harmony or social equilibrium which, in turn, creates the conducive atmosphere necessary for national development.

Table 1: FIXED-PHRASE GENRE OF ORAL POETRY (PROVERBS)

Category	Metaphysical Principle/ Aphorism	Universal Message	Symbolic Signification
A	<i>Biri ka m biri</i> Live and let live	Justice	Qfo
B	<i>Ndịnotù bu ike</i> Unity is strength	Mutual co- existence	Kolanut
C	<i>Onweghị ihe bụ ihe ọhụrụ n'ụwa</i> There is nothing new on earth	Moderation	
D	<i>A ruo aruo ẹ were rie</i> Labour before pleasure	Hardwork	Ikenga

3.0 THE FREE-PHRASE GENRE

Unlike what obtains in the fixed-phrase genre, exemplified in the proverbs, the oral poet in the free-phrase genre is not tied down to any form of fixed wording. He is free to create, to improvise, to display his ingenuity as a poet depending on the subject matter, the audience, and the context of his performance. His utterances on a joyful occasion, like childbirth, for instance, differ from his utterances on a sorrowful occasion, like bereavement. It is in such situations that he employs his oral artistry as a means of social control in the form of satire, praise, and admonition.

3.1 Satire (*Ikpè*)

The satirist “takes it upon himself to correct, censure and ridicule the follies and vices of society and thus to bring contempt and derision upon aberrations from a desirable and civilized norm” (Cuddon, 1979:599). This view of satire lays emphasis on the punitive but ignores the corrective aspect. But in Igbo culture, satire as a weapon for correcting the social foibles is always discernible as is shown in these observations :

The aim of satire is always to expose an offender to shame or disgrace with a view to making him behave better (Egudu, 1972:78).

The purpose of satire in traditional Igbo society is perhaps to punish the delinquent by bringing him to ridicule. This, it is hoped, will help to correct him (Uzoichukwu, 2001:49).

Any act of misdemeanour in Igbo society can be the subject of satire but here, we are going to concentrate on some anti-social acts with the objective that satire on them will enhance the conducive atmosphere necessary for national development.

3.1.1 Promiscuity

Satire on this is much reflected in oral Igbo poetry and may be directed to the married and the unmarried alike. Promiscuity leads to many ills in the society such as unwanted pregnancy which may result in abortion with its grave consequences, in children having no paternal line of

inheritance, in disruption in the educational pursuits of both sexes, and in sexually transmitted diseases, particularly the dreaded AIDS. Because of the enumerated dire consequences of promiscuity, “there is immense variety to the theme of sexual satire” (Nwoga, 1981:234) as is evident from the few examples below :

Ebelebe egbuole oo

Ilu mara ụka, Dee Okwuonu.

Daa Sabina, nwanna m

Mba a la-abara gi,

Sabina aturuła ime okwa o.

Enyi ya nwoke ee

O gara skul gara afoime.

O bu oyi vu akom.

Onye huru onye hichara ike

Bia inyu nsi ee ?

Ebelebe egbuole ee (Ukaegbu, 2000).

(Disaster has struck

The proverb is suited to elder, Okwuonu.

Sabina, our daughter,

In spite of being scolded at,

Sabina has got impregnated outside wedlock.

Her boyfriend is responsible.

She was sent to school but she got impregnated.

Fever is the symptom of malaria.

Who has ever seen one who after cleaning his anus

Goes to defecate ?

Disaster has struck).

By keeping a boyfriend who got her impregnated outside wedlock, at the expense of her education, Sabina has cleaned her anus before defecating.

In the following excerpt, the married woman who abandons her husband and children and goes into prostitution, thereby contacting the pandemic disease, AIDS, is the butt of satire :

E lewe ukwu e gbuo eghu:

Gị gburu aso l'iyi ?

Iyi anyi ji anu mmiri

Gị gburu aso l'iyi ?

Ada hapuru di ya, churu najra gawa.

Ada hapuru obodo ya, churu damasi gawa.

Churu najra, chuta ukwu ita.

Churu najra, chuta ukwu ita.

E lewe ukwu e gbuo eghu

Ukwu amikpoala.

Ada aluola di ohuo

Luta oria o biri l'aja ocha.

E kweghi ekwe na-ekwe n'ute ekwere...

(Ukaegbu, *ibid.*)

(Robust waist that attracts :

Is it you that spat in the stream?

The stream which supplies us drinking water.

Is it you that spat in the stream?

Ada abandoned her husband in quest for money.

Ada abandoned her children in quest for money.

Ada abandoned her town in quest for damask material.

In quest for money, she got emaciated leg in exchange.

In quest for money, she got emaciated waist in exchange.

Even her robust hips also got dried up.

Ada has now got a new husband

In the nature of AIDS, a terminal disease.

The obstinate is tamed on a funeral pyre.)

Promiscuity, particularly among married women, is so much frowned upon in traditional Igbo society that in some areas of Igboland it needs a sort of confession by the offender, followed by some form of propitiation to appease the gods and the ancestors. This ritual is known as *isa ifi* and implies, among other things, that after the woman must have confessed her act of infidelity, the male culprit should provide a goat and other items which should be used for the ritual of appeasement. Failure to do this will result in serious consequences such as protracted

labour which may lead to the death of the woman; it may also lead to the eventual death of the children, and the husband.

3.1.2 *Affectation*

This is one of the frivolities which people are generally prone to and is not considered a serious misdemeanour that deserves satirizing. When, however, hypocrisy affects a serious institution, such as marriage, those guilty of it are taken to have committed a serious anti-social act and, therefore, become the butt of satire. Such is generally the case when a would-be wife displays some hypocritical attitude in her initial visits to her future husband in what is literally known as observing the land, *nlele ala*, or *mmara ala*, when she watches the character and the level of affluence of her husband who, in turn, watches her own character. Such attitude is displayed so that she may be held in high esteem, and the marriage consummated.

In the song that follows, the fiancée is satirized through the woman's exaggerated false praise of her lineage and all things with which she is associated, to the chagrin of the husband who discovered that things were not as presented.

Agboghobia

- Oguri* : *Agboghobia na njeni nani eje ngwaa – oo*
Okweuri : *Mmmm, ogèri mara di ya – o (nkwenwo sote ahiji, oguri).*
- Oguri* : *Egwu à bükwò egwu ogèri ji amara di ya – o*
” *Egwu à bükwò egwu ogèri ji dàbere di ya – o.*
” *Ogèri dàbere di ò wèrè mmà gbuo okwù – o.*
” *Egwu à bükwò egwu ogèri nà – àbija nà mbụ - o.*
” *O kwuo n’elu kwuo n’alà nwoke akwàdoro ya – o.*
” *O bja o sị di ya nà àgbò ha nà-àmụta nwà uha-a*
” *O bja o sị di ya nà egbu hà nà-èjila ito-o*
” *O bja o sị di ya nà òkukò ha nà-àchilà iri-o.*
” *O gbaghị izù naàbò nà ito - o*

Ogèrì dīkà ibè ya – o.

Nwoké beeni beeni, bee ògèrì aghòwuò m – oo.

(Uzoachukwu, 2001:168-170)

(Young Maiden

Soloist : Young maiden, proceed, do proceed fast.

Chorus : Mmmm, let the wife care for the husband (repeated
after each line by soloist).

Soloist : With this song, the wife cares for the husband.

„ With this song, the wife wins the heart of the husband.

„ Having won the husband's heart, she becomes boastful.

„ With this song, the wife is initiated into the husband's
family.

„ She next extols herself, and the husband appears gullible.

„ She boasts to her husband that her lineage is unusually
prolific.

„ She boasts to her husband that her goat at a go nurtures
three young ones

„ She boasts to her husband that her hen at a go nurtures
ten chickens.

„ Not long after,

The wife turns out to be like the generality of women.

And the husband regrets, regrets, regrets that he has
been deceived.)

In the chant below, the satire on the affectation and attitude of women towards marriage goes beyond the period of engagement. It touches on their attitude before and after the payment of bride price, during pregnancy, and after childbirth. This is all the more incisive because it is rendered by a female artist :

Ngwugwu naasato ka nwaanyi ji eje be di ha :

E jeruo e buru uzò gbaghee ngwùgwu àmàràmiìhe -

Chi fo a tuturu aziza zaa mbara ututu,

Kute mmiri.

Tuturu ogu ruwa oru a kwadoghi akwado.

Nwoke ewere biri ego mbibi tinye isi na nwaanyi.
Nwaanyi àmara na ndị nwe ya ga-anara ego,
Na ọ diweghị nwoke igbagha azu.
Ọ were legharja anya afọ ime ana-achana-a,
Afọ ime achagha-aa
Mgbe ahụ afọ ime nà-edere-ee,
Ọ mara na ọ dị ime,
Ọ gbaghee ngwugwu à mà àma a màcha amacha wusa,
Mgbe ahụ ọ na-cburu ime onwa neeri,
Ọ muputa nwata ọ buru ihe kwuwara akpụ
Ọ gbaghee ngwugwu àsirịmaasi,
 (Uzochukwu, 1985:56)

(A woman usually takes eight parcels with her for delivery to her husband.
 On arrival at his house she unties the parcel of commonsense –
 In the morning, broom in hand, the compound is swept,
 Water is fetched.
 Hoe in hand, she starts farm work without preparation.
 The man settles for a loan and plunges headlong for the woman.
 The woman is now assured that her relations will receive the
 bride price,
 And that for the man, there is no going back.
 She notices she is having signs of pregnancy –
 That she is pregnant,
 When the pregnancy is confirmed,
 And she is sure she is pregnant,
 She unties and displays the parcel of intractability.
 After she has remained pregnant for ten months,
 She gives birth to a male issue,
 She unties the parcel of altercation.)

3.1.3 Avarice

The get-rich-quick syndrome in our society today is a source of destabilization as it leads to serious acts of misdemeanour. Commonest among such acts is the spate of ritual killings with the attendant emotional traumatic effect on the society. Its being the subject of satire is an

indication that oral poetry treats not only traditional themes but also handles current issues :

Chikwendu, nwa Ikwulagu
Olee nwanne gi ?
Otu eriri afọ nne gi ?
Ike nna gi ?
Gi gburu asọ l'iyi
Ma igbaanu Benzi,
Ma iwuonu ụlọ, wayiti hawusu.
Ihe nwanne mere nwanne ya :
Weta isi were isi.
O di egwu oo
Baa taa, nwuo echi –
Anyi achoghi udi uba a.
Anyi achoghi ego –
Ego obara lee – ee.
Anyi achoghi ya.
Anyi choro ogalihu.
Anyi choro ihe nke ele ele – o.

(Ukaegbu, *ibid.*)

(Chikwendu, son of Ikwulagu,
Where is your brother ?
Your brother from the same womb ?
The strength of your father ?
You did an abominable thing,
So that you'll ride a Benzi,
So that you'll build a house, a white house.
What a brother did to a brother :
Bring a human head in exchange for wealth.
It is terrible.
Grow rich today and die tomorrow –
We don't want such wealth.
We don't want such money –
Blood money.
We don't want such

We want progress.
We want the desirable.)

In the olden days, the cult of *ibènnè*, symbolized by *ògirisì* (*newbouldia laevis*) forbade one thinking of spilling the blood of the kith and kin. Such an act was generally met with instant justice meted out by the gods and the ancestors. But today, this fear is gone and people are perpetrating all sorts of atrocities like the murder, or the kidnapping of their consanguineous relations, as recounted in the above chant.

3.2 Praise (*Òtító*)

Praise as a means of encouraging the right behaviour in the society finds expression in the Igbo adage: 'If the valiant is praised for his valour, / He perpetuates the valiant deeds' (*E too dike na nke o mere, / O mekwa ọzọ*). This does not mean that praise is reserved for only the valiant. Instead, as observed by Egudu (1972:104), praise abounds in almost all types of oral Igbo poetry, as many occasions in the life of the Igbo are marked by exuberant praise songs and verses, with masquerades and *ọzọ* title candidates praising themselves and others, with people praising famous runners, farmers, wrestlers, and people renowned for other achievements, and with admirers praising beautiful and charming ladies when the occasion arises. We are, however, going to concern ourselves with the praised, whose attitudes have direct impact on the betterment of the society.

3.2.1 Hospitality

As we pointed out in our treatment of the proverbs, in a society not operating a welfare state, any act of hospitality or generosity is particularly praiseworthy. This is because it is through such act that the poor and the elderly can be catered for; it is through such act that some community projects such as the provision of infrastructure are undertaken. In the following excerpt, the hospitable qualities of the deceased, in caring for the members and the non-members of the kindred when she was alive is praised. She saw to most of their basic needs including food and clothing.

*Daa anyi o huru obia gbaa nkwa,
Nwunye di mukariri nne,
Ewu ! Otu aka ejiele m,
Ugo bere n'oji efeliele.
Nne, Nwaazukaamuru,
Nwaanyi mara mma, aha ya amaa.*

*O nweghi nwa okpu ga-abia nga a,
O na-agaghi eledo anya.
O nweghi ndi nwoke bu obia na ndi nwaanyi
O na-agaghi ileba anya.*

*Umunne ya otu ahụ.
Ya buru nke iwu ogbo na-atu ugbua
Ya abia kasara nne,
Nne ga-enye ya ego.
Ya aburu onye nke aguu ji ugbua,
Nne ga-enye ya nri.
Ya aburu nwunye di na enweghi mkpuru.
Ya gba oto eje,
Nna ga-enye ya mkpuru.*

(Uzochukwu, 1992:45)

(Our sister who dances when she sees a visitor,
A co-wife who cares for one more than one's mother,
Alas ! My one hand is broken,
The eagle that perched on the *iroko* tree has flown away.
Mother, *Nwaazukaamuru*,
A beautiful woman with a beautiful name.

There is no daughter of the kindred who comes here,
That she does not care for.
There is no male or female visitor,
That escapes her attention.
Her own people she treats in like manner.
If anyone has no money for his contributions,
And he comes to tell Mother,
Mother will give him money.

If anyone is hungry at this moment,
Mother will give him food.
If a co-wife has no clothing,
And she is ill-clad,
Mother will give her some clothing).

3.2.2. *Philanthropy*

In the next excerpt, a medical doctor is praised for his various acts of philanthropy such as the building of the town-hall for the community, the care of the sick, and the assistance to pregnant women for the safe delivery of their children :

*Chifu Dọkọ Mbuko,
Onye m ji eje mba,
Aka la-agwo ọrịa,
Onye wuru taun vila n'ala Umuahia.
O jiri nwaanyi o muo nwa
Ihe adiwo mma-o.
Ihe anyi bu n'uche emelewo.*

(Chief Doctor Mbuko,
The one I am proud of,
The hand that cures the sick,
The one that built a town hall for Umuahia.
He assists the pregnant women to give birth to children.
Things are now alright.
What we long expected has happened.)

3.2.3 *Self Praise for Transforming the Society*

We have so far demonstrated through the excerpts above how the oral poet eulogizes those who have helped to better the society. But being aware of his role in the society, the oral poet, resorts to self praise. This is in consonance with an Igbo anecdote in which the lizard says it should praise itself, for being denied adulation by man after falling from an *iroko* tree and still stays alive. In the excerpt that follows, the oral poet metaphorically calls himself a bell that produces a beautiful inscrutable sound, a bell that, when slung over the shoulder, courageously jingles without minding the danger on the road:

*Abu m mgbalimgba
 na-amaghi uzo di egwu !
 Okwu m bu
 nke a naghị amacha amacha :
 ị nụ ihe m na-ekwu taata,
 irote nke m kwuru gboogbo,
 ị chee na ị matachaala okwu m.
 Mana ị maghị
 ihe m ga ekwu echi,
 maka na ọ bu m bu onye
 okwu mịrị n'ọnu ya.
 Mmadu niile maara
 na okwu di m n'ọnu,
 maka na dibia ji ire m
 gwọ agwugwọ ! (Egudu, 1992:50)*

(I am the bell
 that minds not a dreadful road !
 My words are
 such that are never mastered wholly :
 if you hear what I am saying today
 and you remember what I said long ago,
 you think you have mastered my words.
 But you do not know
 what I will say tomorrow,
 for I am the one
 in whose mouth words have fruited.
 Everybody knows
 that there are words in my mouth,
 for a charmist used my tongue
 to contrive a charm !)

In the next excerpt, the poet boastfully regards all those imitating her as impostors who, carrying the ram tail (symbol of oral artistry), foolishly think that they will match her chanting skill:

*Umu agbata na-amu olu Chinyeremude o.
Onye jee Eke Ututu o zuru odu ebili buru n'aka.
O si na ya na – eme ka Chinyerude.
O bu ya ?*

*Mgbe e ji akpu ite ha ka mgbere hikwere nne.
Elekwara dibia o na-agwo kwa uzughuzughu ?*

(Uzochukwu, 1985 :32)

(A band of impostors are learning to chant like Chinyeremude. From Eke-Ututu market the ram tail is purchased and carried. Equality with Chinyerude is then claimed.

Is that the way ?

To mould a pot as big as a reservoir takes time.

Doesn't an imitative medicine-man prescribe foolishly ?)

3.3 Admonition (*Ndumodu*)

In addition to employing satire and praise as a means of social control, the oral poet also resorts to admonition. By so doing, he goes didactic by pointing out to the audience the expected social norms. In Igbo society, admonition is so widespread that it is relevant from the cradle to the grave. Thus, as soon as a baby is born, the womenfolk usher it into the world with the following words of admonition :

Okeke,

Too nne gi n'ihu.

Too nna gi n'ihu.

Nne gi gwa gi, nuru.

Nna gi gwa gi, nuru

Onye ozo gwa gi nke di mma, che nti nuru.

Onye ozo gwa gi nke di njo, tunye nti n'ohia.

Bie aka n'agbarijide.

Bie aka na nshị nkita.

Asona oyi, na anyi anaghi aso oyi.

Were ehie muru anya.

Were anyasi rahu ura.

O kpuru uwa, nwerekwa uwa o kpuru.

(Uzochukwu, 1998)

(Okeke,
 Grow up in your mother's presence
 Grow up in your father's presence.
 When advised by your mother, listen,
 When advised by your father, listen.
 When advised well by a stranger, hearken.
 When advised badly by a stranger, turn deaf ear.
 Soil your hand in earthworm's burrow.
 Soil your hand with dog's faeces.
 Exhibit no sign of laziness, for it's not in our character.
 In the afternoon keep awake.
 In the night stay asleep.
 Let the creator of the world take full possession of it.)

Marriage, being a significant rite of passage, just as birth and death, is replete with poetry of admonition, which always emphasizes the theme of reciprocal relationship between the couple :

Ezigbo nwaanyi mali di ya

Ogụri : *Ezigbo nwaanyi mali di ya.*
Ezigbo nwaanyi mali di ya.
Ogoli mali di ya,
O mali obi di ya,
Ya na di ya ebibeenu
O nitali nwannyi mali mee ya,
Na mma nwaanyi bu ekike-ee.

Okweuri : *Kweekwa ka Ogụri*

(Uzochukwu, 2001 :164-165)

(Let the good wife care for the husband

Soloist : Let the good wife care for her husband,
 Let the good wife care for her husband.
 The wife who cares for the husband,
 And knows the mind of the husband,
 Deserves to live with him.
 Whoever marries a woman should also treat her well,
 For the woman's beauty lies in her bodily adornment.

Chorus : Repeats as the Soloist).

On the occasion of death, the oral poet is normally invited to console the bereaved. This he does by exploring various themes such as the universality and the inevitability of death. Through such consolatory words, the pent-up emotion of the bereaved is assuaged, so that funeral poetry can be said to have some therapeutic value as rightly observed by Moore (1968 :88) in the statement that “funeral songs help to adjust the shock and grief which death brings to the living.” In this short excerpt, laden with metaphor, death is portrayed as universal :

Ọnwụ na-egbu ọhà bụ ọ rụfọrọ onye.

Ọ bụ akpọtùma dị n'afọ.

Onye bu afọ ọtùmà je adighi ya?

(Uzochukwu, ibid:92)

(Death that strikes all and sundry is a universal phenomenon

It is the abdomen-sited navel.

Whose abdomen is without a navel ?)

Apart from the admonitory poetry connected with the rites of passage, the oral poet can chip in words of advice in support of any action that is relevant to the well-being of the society. In the excerpt that follows, the poet harps on the necessity for farming for even those who live in the urban areas, those who because they are always on the move are referred to as being on a journey:

Ọ bụrụ na i jewe ije, nwa Uzochukwu –uu,

I jewe ije,

Rote mgbe i ga-atughà jì na mbùbò,

Na a kọwa jì – oo ... (Uzochukwu, 1985 :97)

(Even if you are on a journey, son of Uzochukwu,

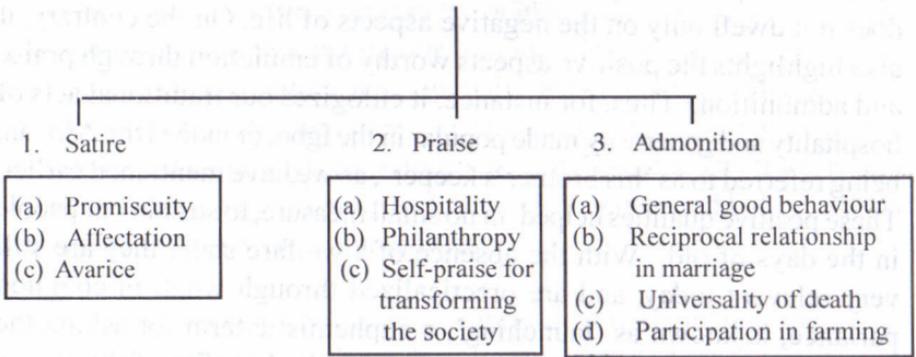
If on a journey,

Remember to plant some yams in the farm nearest your residence,

During yam planting season...)

TABLE 2: FREE-PHRASE GENRE OF ORAL POETRY

Oral Poetry



4.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Bamgbose (1991:18) quoting Adesola’s Convocation Address of 1986 affirms that “through arts and the humanities, human beings reaffirm or challenge the values by which they live; try out new ways of thinking about society, sift their attitudes, investigate their motives, look back on what they have done, and measure their hopes, joys, and pains.” In line with this observation, we have tried to demonstrate how oral poetry, a branch of the humanities, has positioned us to “try out new ways of thinking about society.” By looking inward at our tradition, we have shown how the philosophical contents of our proverbs emphasize such virtuous attributes as justice, mutual co-existence, wholesome achievement, moderation, and all other positive attributes relevant in creating the conducive environment for national development. We have pointed out how some inbuilt mechanisms in our traditional society had provided the avenues for dealing with such anti-social acts as injustice, marital promiscuity, culpable homicide particularly when it is perpetrated on the kith and kin. It is regrettable that the incidence of these nefarious practices has increased considerably in our modern society, an indictment of the effectiveness of borrowed religion and culture and an evidence that the traditional ways of dealing with them has been jettisoned. This lends credence to the view that “the greatest problem of development in modern African societies is that it is not rooted in the African tradition” (Ogude, 2002:58).

We have also demonstrated that oral poetry, through satire with its effective way of generating shame-feeling and guilt-feeling on the offender, helps to minimize anti-social acts in the society. But oral poetry does not dwell only on the negative aspects of life. On the contrary, it also highlights the positive aspects worthy of emulation through praise and admonition. Thus, for instance, it eulogizes our traditional acts of hospitality and generosity made popular in the Igbo, or indeed the African, being referred to as 'his brother's keeper', as we have mentioned earlier. These positive qualities helped, in no small measure, to sustain our people in the days of old. With the absence of a welfare state, they are still very relevant today, and are practicalized through what, in common parlance, is known as 'launching', a euphemistic term for asking the 'haves' in the society to donate money for the benefits of the 'have-nots'. It is through such generous donations that infrastructural facilities are provided for the community, funds provided for the education of the poor, and cottage industries built for the employment of the restive youth. Through these measures, their material well-being, a significant aspect of national development, is assured. Through admonitory poetry, which features prominently in all spheres of human endeavour, the right attitude is inculcated at all levels of our existence. It is in such poems, for instance, that the mutual relationship between the couple, which makes for success in marriage, is explored. It is in such poems that the dignity of labour and the need for farming which is relevant to national development, as it makes food available and provides employment, are featured.

It is hoped that the role of oral poetry as an agent of national development, through the commendation of actions that enhance social equilibrium and the condemnation of anti-social behaviour that militates against people's well-being, has been established. By commending people, through praise and admonition to help in providing basic needs and infrastructure, oral poetry contributes to the material component of development. By condemning people through satire to desist from anti-social behaviour (the avoidance of which will in itself also enhance the material component), it contributes to the moral component of development. This role is all the more effective as it is rooted in the

people's culture, and finds expression in the use of the indigenous language which the oral poet and the audience are familiar with.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, if oral poetry, or indeed all types of oral literature, contributes so much towards our national development, towards the conservation of our culture, it is regrettable that it is not given the attention it deserves. Presently, oral literature is almost on the verge of extinction as the contexts under which it flourishes are threatened by the forces of modernisation. The situation in Igboland, as recounted below, may be typical of other African communities :

Igbo children, for instance, rarely devote their time to moonlight games these days because of modern forms of entertainment and the pursuit of formal education. As a result, the accompanying traditional Igbo songs, prose narratives, riddles and tongue twisters are dying out. Because of modern medical facilities and the influence of Christianity, not many Igbo people visit diviners for their health problems and consequently Igbo divination poetry is on the decline. The senility of the Igbo funeral artists, coupled with the fact that the Christian mode of funeral celebration prevents the emergence of new practitioners of this form of oral art, makes Igbo traditional funeral poetry particularly vulnerable to extinction.

(Uzochukwu, 2001:116)

To prevent this state of affairs, concerted action should be taken both by the scholars and the government to salvage what remains. Scholars should collect and transcribe, classify and archive, analyse and evaluate all forms of oral literature. With the support of government, these materials, after being graded, should be fed into the curricula of primary and secondary schools and also made the subject of study in institutions of higher learning. Government at local and state levels should plan, supervise, and fund traditional festivals through which oral artistry is generated. On such occasions, traditional oral artists should be motivated through being invited to compete with one another. Audio-visual

recording of the artists' performances should then be undertaken so as to preserve them for posterity. It is also through such recording and preservation that oral literature will continue to serve as a springboard for the artistic creation of modern writers through their exploitation of its thematic features and the aesthetic resources of its indigenous languages.

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To the Almighty Father who has sustained me and my family, be the greatest glory, and to all who have charted the course of my academic career, I record these few words of gratitude.

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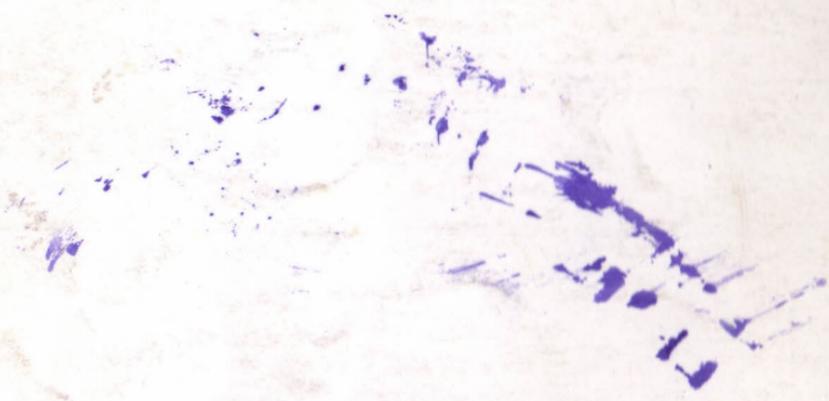
Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you very much for your attention.

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