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INDIGENOUS NIGERIAN ORAL DRAMA AS
AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL REGULATION:
A STUDY OF OGBLLO SECRET SOCIETY OF IDOMA

Idris O. O. Amali

Sacred Mockery and invective
expel blight, death and evil.

Robert Eliot 1960¹

The Worshippers, by the nature of the
Orisha, have the right to ridicule and, of
course, they believe that it is good for the
health of the society.

J. A. Adedeji 1967²

This paper seeks to demonstrate that there is a fundamental element to rural institutions of leisure and recreation as a general pattern, which is that these institutions harbor within themselves organized anthropological and sociological control systems associated with the maintenance of ethics and morality, and in some extreme cases, the detection and prevention of crime.

The focus in this paper is on the study of entertainment and recreational elements of the Ogblo Night Mask of the Idoma peoples of lower Benue of Nigeria with an excursion into the functionality of the institution. The Ogblo Night Mask institution is a rural art of comic origin the premise of which is satire, and the aim of which is to correct.

The paper will highlight the medium, mode, approach, and techniques through which Ogblo executes these set objectives. As an institution of fierce and vibrant verbal expression it will be shown that it employs comic sensibilities to satirize by passing ridiculous comment on social ills with the aim of correcting. We shall conclude by examining the intrinsic and extrinsic values of Ogblo as an institution and its importance to national objectives.

Existence of Ogblo Societies

Before the advent of the British colonial system of administration of justice, and subsequent to the establishment of a police

force, Nigerian nationalities possessed various indigenous institutions, both dramatic and non-dramatic societies, whose responsibilities were to maintain law and order.³ There is the humanistic and spiritual level, the visible and invisible. On the humanistic levels are dramatic societies with human beings as protagonists performing the function of upholding social morality. At this level, human beings interact with fellow human beings, and deviants are on the receiving end of social justice. Such deviants who behave contrary to societal expectations face varying degrees of punishment from such dramatic institutions. Some of the sanctions range from compulsory payment of fines to sacking the homes of the deviant, depending on the degree of offence. Social vices inherent in individuals, families, and the lineages, like theft, fighting, adultery, and stinginess, attract negative and satirical commentaries which are anthologized in the recreational institutions. Thus, the songs of such dramatic societies castigate and repudiate social ills for the society to see and correct itself. This is done through the deployment and utilization of comic sensibilities inherent in these societies. As we laugh, we bite deeper into human follies and foibles. For instance, the Ifoma-Otukpo Obide women's performing group is very observant and capable of ridiculing and insulting social deviants:

Umo Umo went to Tivland to steal
 The Tivs nearly killed him
 But he turned (shifted) it to the viper
 Viper, the painful one
 Does not know the foot (root) of this
 one.⁴

Eimonye lives in a home in farmstead
 Because of stinginess he lives in a home
 in the farmstead
 Eimonye child of Ogwa lives in farmstead
 Because of stinginess he lives in a home in
 the farmstead.
 Eimonye lives in a home in the bush
 Because of stinginess he lives in a home
 in the farmstead.⁵

Amongst the traditional societies of the Tiv and the Hausa,⁶ and indeed in most Nigerian communities, are to be found dramatic institutions which through comic acts, satirize societal ills. The Tiv Kwah-hir social drama, for example, runs satiric commentaries on Tiv experiences in its repertoire with a view to correcting social ills. Indeed,

its satirical teeth bite so deep into Tiv political realities that it often faces the wrath of political opponents by total prohibition.⁷

At the spiritual and invisible level, the ancestors and gods of the land play significant roles in uplifting and maintaining social ethics and morality. Tamuno rightly observes:

This mystical link between the dead and living forces in both the making and enforcement of Nigerian laws and customs, before contact with Europeans, is of crucial importance. The fear of breaking such laws and customs, involving dreadful punishment by unseen and allegedly powerful elements in traditional religion, provided an effective preventive factor.⁸

This belief in the unseen is strengthened by the physical re-enactments of ancestors in masquerade forms which are fundamental to the existence of rural recreational or dramatic institutions. For example, the Idoma Alekwafia ancestral masquerade comes out to enforce law when the "law-breaking" is very serious.⁹ Similarly Tamuno reports, "In Nsukka division of Iboland, for example, masked dancers, purporting to represent spirit cult, Omabe were employed by the council of elders whenever there was difficulty in enforcing law and order."¹⁰ The masquerades of *sekipan* practiced among Okrika, Akassa Ijos, Nembe, Kalabari, and Ekpe in Calabar, Bende, and Arochukwu help to maintain order.¹¹

The practice of Ogblo night drama or rural recreational society upon which this paper is based is a well-known phenomenon in most Idoma communities. Ogblo is a sacred society which oversees all human and natural activities in the land. Its primary objective is to insult, expose, and publicly ridicule social ills. In Idoma communities and elsewhere, where Ogblo is absent, other sacred institutions which correct through open insults exist. In Idom-Otukpo, Ogblo and Onyonkpo perform the same function through insults. Similarly, Egbilo and Obagaida in Idoma Ugbogu are noted for their prolific insults.¹² The Abooga sacred society, noted for its outrageous harassment through insults, is found in the Orokam district of Idoma.¹³ In Idoma-Agila, the Able sacred night mask is acknowledged for its devastating insults. In Idoma-Edumoga, Obagaida performs a similar role of social regulation through insults.¹⁴ The Akpa also have the Onyonkpo society.¹⁵ The Idoma districts of Adoka and Ochekwu have both Onyonkpo and Obagaida institutions respectively.¹⁶

Okutside Idoma land, various sacred societies perform similar tasks for social cohesion by insults and public ridicule of social deviants. In Igala land, Abule night mask is note for publicly insulting errant members of the society.¹⁷ Among the Base Nge people of Benue

state, two institutions noted for insulting people at will are Abure and Eri.¹⁸ In Yoruba, Adedeji similarly reports,

During the Egungun festival at Okemesi, the Atikpa, a nocturnal Egungun who indulges in tell-tales, is also remarkable for "portrait caricature," that is deliberate distortion of mannerism of certain individuals he used as target. Although he must not be seen by women, his calls at the door-step of the backyard of any house is a thrilling opportunity for banter.¹⁹

From the Yoruba Iludun-Ekiti of Ondo State comes the strange report of an existing women's sacred society which is not seen by men. When they appear at night for performance, men run into hiding. It principally insults people and performs like the male Ogblo, Onyonkpo, Obagaida, Abooga, Abile, Atikpa, Abule, Abure, and Eri of the peoples of Idoma, Yoruba, Igala, and Basa Nge. An informant who regarded the women's group as "anti-male" told this writer of his ordeal. He said he was surprised that there could be a women's sacred society which performs while the men folk are subjected, terrorized, and forced to hide behind their doors throughout the night.²⁰

Organizational Structure of Ogblo

Ogblo is organically structured for effective execution of its principal objective, which is the artistic exploitation of comic elements as a powerful instrument for releasing vexed insults and satirical commentaries on errant members of the society and society as a whole. The team of Ogblo is made up of four powerful dramatic personae. The protagonist, who is also the eldest, is called "Odumoolike." He is also regarded as their father. Odumoolike is the master of them all in terms of ability to abuse and to bare the secrets and flaws of his victims. He is the one who knows the verbal matrix, formulae, nuances, techniques, and intricacies of the insults. "Emenye" occupies a secondary position. He is regarded as the child of "Oliko" or Odumooliko. Emonyne insults but his bag of wits and insults is not as deep as that of Odumooliko. Before Ogblo performs under the cover of night, the setting sun is generally greeted with preponderous laughter from Emonyne. The laughter is a striking warning signal which indicates an impending performance of Ogblo and is used to warn women to keep off.

The third persona, Odude, is principally in charge of Ogblo songs. His basic function is to introduce songs at strategic points in the course of Ogblo performance. The fourth persona is composed of the

"Ikpaipoliwele, children of Iwele. Iwele is a very tiny bird. Their function is to perform the chorus of the songs.²¹

The Powers of Ogblo

Women are not allowed to see Ogblo. It has the mandate of the entire society to function and is thus regarded as a spiritual, societal, and democratic voice vested with the powers to insult any member of the society regardless of his social standing. No single sane member of the society nor the society as a whole can reply to Ogblo with equal insults, nor can he contest the credibility of Ogblo's claims in its very devastating insults in any traditional modern court.

The Functions of Ogblo Society

It is pertinent at this point to attempt a brief analysis of the functional aspects of Ogblo in traditional Idoma society. Ogblo is the social eye that oversees all aspects of individual and social behavior. It is believed that no secret in the land passes without the knowledge of Ogblo. Ogblo therefore holds a public mirror, a mirror through which the society sees itself, whether it is beautiful or ugly, with the intention of amending itself. This powerful mirror which Ogblo holds, magnifies for the public eye social excesses and evil in the land, an exposure which ridicules social deviants and demands that they change. It is on record that in the Idoma-Otukpo district, the emergence of Ogblo in the recent past forced social deviants or criminals to abandon their activities as they were systematically exposed through Ogblo insults.

Ogblo has the mandate of the society to impose sanctions on social deviants, acting according to traditional provisions in order to correct and uphold social ethics and morality. In this manner, behaviors of individuals and the society in general are regulated by Ogblo.²² For example, it is the custom of the Idoma people that when certain animals like the elephant, the leopard, or the hyena are killed, their vital parts are expected to be presented as homage to the king, council of elders, and the family head. Through these individuals, the killers of a great animal are made to undergo some ritualistic ceremonies involving the washing away from their faces the evil spirit "Ogwu." If this ceremony is not performed, and the cosmic order is disturbed, the resultant effect on the hunter (offender) is generally very devastating as he could subsequently run amok aided by the evil spirits of the hunt.²³ Any hunter who fails to comply with this tradition is brought to account by Ogblo. Ogblo in

such a situation is deployed by the council of elders who make bold attacks on such a defaulter until he has complied with the traditional provisions. Thus, Ogblo is an instrument that regulates people's ways of life or tradition.

Another important function which Ogblo performs is the settlement of disputes. Disputes between individuals, families, clans, and lineages attract Ogblo performances for the restoration of peace and harmony. On the day of performance to settle disputes, Ogblo has within itself a dynamic legal organ to cross-examine the quarreling sides. The proceeding is punctuated with very serious and realistic insults directed at either or both of the parties, or anyone it desires to insult. In the final analysis, apart from the fines which the guilty person has to pay, Ogblo turns around and insults such a person "down to earth." It is on record in the recent past from the Upu village of Otlukpo that a woman who was found guilty, fined, and insulted by Ogblo had to abandon her matrimonial home out of shame, since she could not withstand the insults and public ridicule. On this point Ode Agadagba, in an interview with this writer says that "if Ogblo insults a woman, she would go and hang."

The other function of Ogblo society lies in its ability to insult in lucid and artistically expressive language using all its verbal matrix to arouse laughter. Ogblo therefore has no words to toy with; anytime it opens its mouth to speak, it hurls insults upon insults: laughter and exclamations are equally insulting, and its songs cut to expose the bag of individual and societal inadequacies. The verbal attacks from Ogblo bite deep into human realities. An analysis of the thematic content of Ogblo's insults would indicate its sensitivity to and outright dislike for social vices which tend to destabilize social cohesion. Its insults, therefore, target immoral acts—adultery, theft, vanity, garrulity, greed, quarrels, prostitution, and other behaviors that are not in line with the people's way of life. Even natural deformities are not spared. Indeed, among the deformities, social evils, and immoral acts targeted, ugliness, along with theft, seems to be a major preoccupation of the Ogblo society. Thieves are usually objects of ridicule through vehement verbal attacks. Names of such individuals are mentioned publicly. Adultery, too, attracts strong attacks from Ogblo. Adultery in Idoma tradition is a serious matrimonial offence. The effect of an adulterous wife on her husband is a grave one indeed in Idoma tradition. If the adultery is not quickly detected, and appropriate cleansing ceremonies not conducted, it is believed that it could lead to the death of the husband, the wife herself, or any of their children. It is therefore understandable that Ogblo society is desirous of persuading morally corrupt women to abandon the secret practice of infidelity or face the risk of instant divorce according to tradition.

Prostitutes easily fall victims to Ogblo which indicates its disgust with immoral acts. Ogblo ridicules the profession. Where the prostitute is unlucky enough to be ugly, she is regularly visited and revisited as a center for verbal attacks, the Ogblo capitalizing on her inadequacies from an aesthetic perspective. Nagging and quarrelsome wives are cautioned through insults to keep calm. Physical deformity, which is not a man-controlled phenomenon, interests Ogblo extensively as it probes into the physiology of the deformed.

The functional aspect of Ogblo would not be complete if no mention were made of its entertainment potential. Ogblo as a comic institution deploys its comic sensibilities to the fullest advantage with a view to arousing laughter within the audience, thereby subjecting its victims to untold public ridicule. Its performance generally attracts a very large male following throughout the village because of its sharp wits. The audience enjoys or takes delight in listening to the public exposure of the secrets and ills of other members of the society.

Verbal Formulae

The following briefly indicate the verbal formulae or stylistic presentation by which Ogblo insult poetry attempts to achieve its purpose:²⁴

Indirection is a powerful satirical device amply utilized by Ogblo in its ridiculing attacks. In this situation, the person under attack is not mentioned except that Ogblo, in very insulting and graphic language, describes all the known characters of the victim, thereby leaving the audience (which is generally informed) to mentally fix the character. This tactical approach arouses tremendous laughter in the audience.

Onomatopoeia features prominently in Ogblo verbal performance. Here, the central characters being insulted have some aspects of their mannerisms mimicked verbally, such as their ways of talking, eating, and walking. Ogblo resorts to utilization of onomatopoeic words to heighten the comic intensity in the insult and thereby enhance audience participation through laughter.

Incongruity is another device through which comedy generally thrives. Therefore Ogblo as a rural comic cult uses a lot of this device. Expressively incongruous ideas generally released from the Ogblo's verbal repertoire intensify comic episodes and the audience's laughter.²⁵

Diction is yet another device used by Ogblo. Ogblo's verbal strength lies in its vocabulary: its ingenuity resides in the descriptiveness of the insult, which is generally very pungent, creative, imagistic, and graphic. Thus, it is capable of expressing itself in appropriately insulting and ridiculing words to suit the person under attack. Comparisons with animals and objects are generally accurate. It is this creative ingenuity of Ogblo that makes the performance always exciting and entertaining.

Songs are frequently utilized at strategic situations to heighten episodes of insults for dramatic effect. These songs, apart from their generally melodious rendition, are songs of grave insults. Thus, the songs attack and castigate the victims at whom they are directed. Odumooliko's "killing" insults persistently and aggressively appear in the songs .

Repetition, as a device, uses comic acts that are repeatedly employed to arouse public laughter. Particularly comical statements are repeated with voice variation for effective and dramatic rendition.

Exaggeration is used by Ogblo as a technique to effectively arouse the audience's sense of laughter. Here, what Ogblo sees as insult (for example, bad character, ugliness, or deformity of the victim) are blown beyond natural and human proportions, thereby leaving the audience embroiled in tremendous laughter.²⁶

Laughing as a technique is used by Ogblo to laugh at its victim at the same time as it unfurls insults upon the latter. Laughter is introduced by Emonyé at the appropriate moment, especially when Odumooliko's insult is very severe. Emonyé's laughter is to add salt to wounds, as the laughter is meant to further ridicule the person under verbal attack.

Exclamation, a formulaic alert technique basically delivered in a blasting tone, is generally used to draw people's attention to certain extremities of human inadequacies. This technique heightens the audience's anxiety for impending serious insults.

Vocal manipulation as technique involves the manipulation by Ogblo of its voice (high, low, or sharp) to achieve a particular comic effect. This technique is prominent in Ogblo performances.

Simile is a predominant device frequently used in Ogblo performances. Here actions, objects, issues, and ideas are related to

one another. The Idoma expression *Le bee* (-like) is frequently used. Accurate deployment of simile reactivates the audience's sense of laughter.

Question and response, a technique with a high sense of comic effect, is a deliberate strategy devised by Ogblo to repeatedly ask questions on a particular instance and then pause for an answer. The gap between question and response is usually filled with audience laughter. The response (if it comes) and the manner of its rendition enhance the sense of humor of the audience which is already in the grips of laughter.

Maledictions, essentially used for purposes of chastising deviants, are exploited for their highly ironic effects. The audiences of Ogblo are generally not hostile, in spite of Ogblo's hostile posture towards them. Sometimes the audiences offer gifts to Ogblo. But the words which usually accompany such donations are not all that flattering. In such situations, the Ogblo in turn offers contemptuous prayers for the donor. For example, Ogblo would address his benefactor as follows:

Go and breastfeed big flaming fire
Lie on the rail line for the train
To take you to his destination
When you lie down today to sleep
May you never wake up again
Until the crooked fingers of ode
Have brought out the loads
In your womb.

These verbal formulae, properly utilized by Ogblo, enable it achieve its primary objective. It castigates and repudiates social deviants through maximized exploitation of comic elements with the aim of correcting for the sustenance of societal norms, ethic, and morality.

Conclusion

From the foregoing study of Ogblo sacred society as a powerful institution which helps to check social excesses (and other related institutions in Nigeria with similar functions) the following statements can be made:

- (i) Nigerian traditional societies possess basic indigenous institutions and organs for the maintenance of law and order,

thereby helping to uphold their traditions, and creating congenial atmosphere for national development.

(ii) Because of their inherent cultic nature and ancestral or spiritual attachments, such institutions are symbols of societal purity and sanity, and are therefore treated with a high sense of respect by the people.

(iii) The presence and impact of societies like Ogblo institutions in the body politic of indigenous Nigerian political or administrative systems is a national phenomenon.

(iv) The outrageous and unreserved approach in which institutions like Ogblo reproach their victims, regardless of their social status, is a genuine manifestation of the presence of a high degree of freedom of expression in our indigenous Nigerian society.

(v) In Nigerian indigenous societies, therefore, the law is for everyone, and it does not privilege anyone over others. Even the king is not above the law of the land, since he could easily fall prey to an institution such as Ogblo.

(vi) Nigerian indigenous society is genuinely desirous of a clean and healthy society where evil and social vice are fought with the greatest opposition.

(vii) These sacred institutions operate with a high sense of sincerity and objectivity, and they are regarded as a supreme body which has a sense of judgement that is incontestable.

(viii) What makes our cultural and political set-up function in indigenous societies in Nigeria is the strong will of the people to make it work. The failure of their traditional system represents the obliteration of their cultural identity and existence as a corporate body, and is something they do not want to sacrifice.

(ix) Freedom of expression is synonymous with Nigerian society, and therefore as old as Nigerian society itself. Every Nigerian should be free to express his/her opinion without fear of molestation. It is therefore unacceptable and un-Nigerian for any Nigerian administration to regard constitutional provision for freedom of expression as an extraordinary luxury for Nigerian citizens.

At this point, it is pertinent to strongly suggest that while the modern Nigerian political system is on the track to finding its place in the international political order, it should not ignore the abundant political philosophies of its people and the provision of safety valves that emanate from Nigerian folklore. What this means is that Nigeria should find its own political ideologies that are in tune with the Nigerian indigenous political system.

What is required is for Nigerians to conduct more serious academic researches into the abundant folklore of the Nigerian nationalities and to harness such findings for national development. Government should give ample assistance to research scholars to aggressively document Nigerian folklore. While extensive literatures exist on many Nigerian nationalities, there are many more Nigerian nationalities whose folklore has yet to be appreciated. The government should therefore sponsor scholars irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, to conduct research and to document the folklore of those nationalities whose language, literature, and culture have not been properly documented. This is especially important considering the enormous threats which the cultures of these societies face daily due to the aggressive incursion of Western ways of life that try to undermine our own traditional values.

The Nigerian nation should therefore rise to protect its own culture, as a nation without culture is a nation adrift.

NOTES

¹Robert Eliot, *The Power of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 58-59. Cited by J. A. Adedeji, see note 2 below.

²J. A. Adedeji, "Forms and Function of Satire in Yoruba Drama," in *Odu, University of Ife Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1967, p. 65.

³See Tekena N. Tamuno, "Before British Police in Nigeria," in *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 89, 1966, pp. 102-116.

⁴From Odumu Onche Amali, "Songs of Idoma Obide Women's Performing Group," tape recorded in 1983.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶See E. O. Kofoworola, "Traditional Forms of Hausa Drama," in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Ed., Yemi Ogunbiyi, 1981), pp. 164-180. See also O. C. G. B. Gidley, "Yankamaci: The Craft of the Hausa Comedian," in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria* (1981), pp. 255-292.

⁷See E. U. Enem, "The Kwagh-hir Theatre," in *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 120, 1976. Tiv Kwagh-hir was also said to have been prohibited by the very "sectional"

and unpopular defunct Benue Plateau State Government under the leadership of J. D. Gomwalk.

⁸Tamuno, *Op. Cit.*, p. 103.

⁹Samson O. O. Amali (ed.), *Jos Oral History and Literature Texts*, Vol. 3, 1981 for "The Idoma concept of law, judicial process, and judgement homicide," p. 78. (Tape recorded by Samson O. O. Amali, transcribed and translated by R. G. Armstrong, Emman. O. O. Amali.)

¹⁰Tamuno, *Op. Cit.*, p. 105.

¹¹*Loc Cit.* See also U. N. Abalogu, "Ekpe Society in Arochukwu and Bende," in *Nigerian Magazine*, Nos. 126-127, pp. 78-97.

¹²Information from Ode Agadegba and Ltd. Robinson Gbo all from Ugboju district.

¹³My informant is Atabo Oko from Oko Orokam.

¹⁴Information from James Ochigbe from Ingle Edumoga.

¹⁵See Samson O. O. Amali, Onyonkpo (disc) (Night Mask), recorded at Royal enclosure of the king of Akpa, District of Idoma, Benue State of Nigeria. Published by Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, NCR No. 22, Emi Ltd., Lagos.

¹⁶My informants are Yakubu Eje and Godwin Egwa from both districts.

¹⁷My informant is Alex Maiyanga, himself an Igala.

¹⁸Informant is Francis Abaya from Adum-Woiwo in Base Nge, Benue State.

¹⁹Adedeji, *Op. Cit.*, p. 65.

²⁰My informant, Atabo Oko, said he was "locked up" with his host chief P. O. Dada from dusk to dawn by the performance of the female group.

²¹Based on Odumu Onche Amali, "Research Interview on Idoma Ogblo Night Mask," tape recorded in 1983. Otokpa Garuba Alogah of Upu-Otukpo was interviewed.

²²See Samson O. O. Amali, *Op. Cit.*, 1981, pp. 73-112.

²³Samson O. O. Amali, *Onugbe Moloko* (Ibadan: Caxton Press, 1972), p. 3. See also Atabo Oko, "Amali's Onugbo Moloko Cosmology and Universe," B. A. Hons. Essay, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, 1977.

²⁴See also Gidley, *Op. Cit.*, p. 278.

²⁵Lines 70-71 in the appendix exaggerate the smallness of Onyanta's vagina.

²⁶A detailed study of the Ogblo performance techniques is being undertaken by this writer in a separate research due to be completed soon