

**THE IMAGE OF A POET FROM A LAYMAN'S PERSPECTIVE: A CASE STUDY OF  
IGBO SOCIETY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Poetry is expression of a poet's individuality, feelings, emotions and experiences common to other people in society. Hence, a poet is generally perceived as a lyricist who expresses his/her experiences, feelings and emotions in a clear language which connects him/her to the listening audience. This study examines the characteristics of a poet from an ordinary Igbo man's perspective. It suggests that since the Igbo people engage themselves in the creative expression of feelings, emotions and experiences through songs, proverbs, chants, and word play; then everyone in Igbo society is consciously or unconsciously a poet. This is to say that in a traditional Igbo society, events, social or religious activities are often chanted by individuals or groups of individuals.

**KEYWORDS:** Poetry, poet, layman

Generally speaking, the term 'poetry' is an art of composition which can be written (documented) and orally presented by an individual or groups of individuals. In essence, poetry as a form of artistic composition represents the emotions, feelings and the individual thought of a person who wrote the poems. Hence, poetry is a literary type that shares the same characteristics; whether written or spoken.

Different societies have their own forms of poetry irrespective of their levels of development. This is to say that poetry has been part of a cultural milieu with its unique characteristics. These characteristics are determined by the linguistic resources of language, geographical environment, tradition, culture and habits of a given society. Therefore, poetry varies from society to society, from one cultural milieu to another. Based on the above mentioned views, the meaning and values of poetry are explored from a layman's perspective.

## **WHAT IS POETRY?**

The term poetry is defined as the expression of feelings, emotions and ideas which is communicated through language. Kirsner and Mandell (2007) define 'poetry' as "the language of emotions; the medium of expression people use when they speak from their hearts" (816). This simply means that poetry is a medium of spiritual and philosophical expression. The impulse to create and appreciate poetry is part of human experiences, thoughts and emotions. Thus, poetry is an ancient art which has been existing since human beings discovered beauty in language.

The tribal traditional and religious ceremonies which are often celebrated in Igbo cultural milieu with poetic songs, chants and proverbs suggest that poetry existed in the earliest primitive Igbo society. These religious and traditional ritual ceremonies are carried out using chants, songs and eulogies which express what people regard as significant and memorable in their lives. Some of these ceremonies are Ikwa-ozu (burial), Igba-nkwu (marriage), Iti-mmanwu (masquerade), Iri-ji (Yam festival), Egwu-onwa (moonlight play), etc. During these festivals or ceremonies, the entire community takes active part in dancing and singing. Thus, they echo their feelings, emotions and experiences in order to express their pain or pleasure. This also signifies that they are all poets since they orally express their feelings, thoughts, emotions, and experiences in a poetic manner.

Essentially, poetry is a verbal composition designed to convey experiences, ideas or emotions in a clear and imaginative way through language. The origin of poetry is unknown but the fact remains that poetry has been part of every society which probably stemmed up from oral tradition. However, cultural traditions and languages affect poetry to a large extent because they determine the rules that govern the form of its composition in a cultural milieu. Generally, these rules vary considerably from one society to another.

In Igbo cultural society, poetry is seen as an ancient art which uses the oral forms to express the real experiences of people. Poetry exists as part of Igbo culture, religious rites and daily experiences which are usually accompanied by music and dance. Hence, the lives of heroes, kings and dead ancestors are eulogized through poetic songs.

## **WHO IS A POET?**

A poet is a person who composes or writes poems. He/she also adopts language or words as his/her principal tool in order to convey specific messages or express individual feelings to the audience. In essence, a poet may choose to document his poems in a written form or communicate orally to the immediate audience.

In English society, poetry generally is written in terms of some recognizable forms such as the sonnet, ballad, elegy, dirge, epic, lyric, ode, etc. These forms can also be narrative, satirical, dramatic or lyric. Ezeaku (2014) explains that the “narrative poems stress emotion and song. Each of these types has numerous subdivisions: narrative poetry includes the epic, romance, and the heroic chants; lyric poetry includes ballad, pastoral poetry, elegy and epigraph, sonnet and ode” (44).

Some of these forms of poetry may be irrelevant in discussing the poetic expressions of the Igbo cultural society. The poetry genres relevant in the discussion of Igbo society are epic, song-poem (lyric), dirge, heroic recitations, masqueraded chants and poetry of dance and drum. The differences in the poetic forms of English and Igbo societies arise as a result of the differences in their cultural and structural organizations. These societies have different stylistic modes of presenting poetry. The modes of presentation are seen in the areas of rhyme, patterns, stanzas, length, rhythmic tempo and artistic expression of feeling, ideas or experiences. Akporobaro () explains that “It is a matter of differences in the social use of the genres; of their oral modes of delivery, and in the degree of emphasis placed upon such musical values as rhythm, melody and harmony” (296).

## **THE CATEGORIES OF POETS**

From a layman’s perspective, poetry is generally categorized into two, namely: (a) published poet, and (b) unpublished poet.

### **PUBLISHED POET**

This is a poet who expresses his/her individuality, experiences and emotions common to other individuals in society or peculiar to himself or herself as a unique individual. This category of poets is usually educated and will be expected to be either a lyricist singing in clear language about his/her experiences and emotions or a philosophical poet, analyzing his/her experiences and emotions in a clear language accessible to the audience. These experiences are often written and documented for the educated people to read and enjoy. Poems under this category sometimes employ the European or English forms or standards of poetry while exploring the African features or characteristics. They can also be documented using English or Igbo language; hence this makes it widely accessible to a whole range of educated audience. It is also important to understand that poems under this category which are documented can also be presented orally to the audience for pleasure. Some of the poems published in this category have yielded to the philosophy of the western aesthetics as the only and universal concept.

### **UNPUBLISHED POET**

This category of poets is very complex in nature. Here, poets explore their individuality, experiences and emotions using an oral mode of communication. Both the educated and uneducated poets fall into this category since this form of poetry is meant to entertain, express pain or pleasure at a particular point in time. The poems under this category are usually unpublished and are performed in a natural or unnatural situation (context) such as social gatherings, like new yam festival, moonlight setting, religious worships, and play sections. The poems are not written in verses or stanza but are rhythmic and orally presented.

### **THE IMAGE OF A POET FROM A LAYMAN'S PERSPECTIVE**

It is clear that in writing poems; the poet expresses his/her emotions which touches people's feeling and at the same time resounds with their hope, dreams and philosophical views. Rhythm is a very important element of poetry. Ezeaku () explains that rhythm "has its origin in primitive dance and its accompaniments. It implies beat, pulse or movements, etc. Thus, it is expressed through meter which

is a sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables and arranged in a more or less regular pattern. This pattern is not strictly maintained otherwise poetry will be monotonous and dull” (49). In Igbo society, rhythm is in every song or chant presented by a versifier or poet. It is built by an emotional factor; as a person’s feeling grows more intense, his speech tends to become more rhythmic. In daily experiences, passionate expressions have noticeable rhythm; the angry man, happy crowd, the mourners, the drunk, etc reflect rhythm in their vocal/ verbal expressions. Hence, the pulse is the initial rhythm of life, the heartbeat is the man’s rhythmic pattern.

Songs influence every activity in Igbo cultural milieu. The stages of life from birth to death are marked by ceremonies which are reenacted using songs and chants. This suggests that virtually everyone in Igbo society learns the act of singing and chanting which are often times rhythmic in nature. These songs are rendered in ceremonies such as burial ceremonies, childbirth/ child dedication, new yam festival, masquerade festival, etc. Songs are generally associated with different social events which can be religious, social (entertaining), and moral. In this type of gathering, everyone is expected to sing or chorus with the audience. Therefore, if one does not belong to the people that chorus as a group, he/she will be the chorus leader.

This work tries to establish that songs presented by individuals at different situations and contexts in Igbo cultural milieu are poetic and fully laden with rhythm which helps the free flow of powerful emotions or feelings. Thus, in Igbo society social songs are rendered poetically in different social events. These songs are also named to fit the context of the gathering. For examples: marriage songs, funeral songs, moral and educative songs, religious songs, and pleasure songs.

## **MARRIAGE SONGS**

This type of song is usually poetic and is rendered by an individual or groups of individuals. It expresses happiness for the new bride who is getting married. It is sung amidst joy and merriment. Thus:

Ada o bu ka I ghara anyi (Ada are you leaving us)  
Ada o bu ka I ghara anyi (Anyi are you leaving us)  
Lawa be di gi (To your husband house)  
Ada o bu ka I ghara anyi (Ada are you leaving us)  
Lawa be di gi (To your husband house)

Ada chukwu gozie gi (God bless you Ada)  
Ma I lawa be di gi (As you go to your husband's house)  
Ada chukwu gozie di gi (God bless your husband)  
Bu ogo anyi nwoke (Who is our in-law)  
Ada chukwu nyekwa gi nwa (May God give you children)  
Ma I ruo be di gi. (When you arrive your husband's house)

The song blesses the newly married bride and wishes her well in her new marriage. The poetic song blesses the couple, advises them, consoles the bride's parents for giving their daughter away and congratulates the family of the bridegroom for winning the heart of a beautiful damsel. In this context, the act of singing or rendering the poetic song makes the poet an unpublished poet. Though the audience may be educated or uneducated.

### **FUNERAL SONGS**

This is a type of poetic song rendered or sung at the funeral ceremony of an individual. This type of song expresses sorrow and anger over the death of the deceased. Thus, the songs are rendered to console the mourners, and extol the virtues or legacies of the dead. For example:

Ugegbe etiwago na o tiwago (Mirror has broken)  
Ezigbo ugegbe e tiwago na o tiwago (A good mirror has broken)  
Na o tiwara n'ike (it was broken suddenly)

Here mirror connotes life, health and breath. In Igbo cultural concept, once a song like this is rendered; it simply suggests that a person has died. In essence, once a mirror is broken and the pieces can never be collected. Death is transitional; it marks the end of life and the beginning of another journey in the ancestral world. To the living, death is a personal experience which must be experienced individually. In any burial ceremony, mourners render poetic sorrowful songs which express their feelings or emotions towards the death of the deceased.

### **MORAL AND EDUCATIVE SONG**

This type of song is purposely rendered to teach morals or educate the audience. These songs have some underlying message that teach, correct and entertain. The

topic of the songs can be drawn from any subject which must aim at educating people. For example:

E zukwala ohi (Do not steal)  
A gbakwala asiri (Do not gossip)  
E gbukwala ochu (Do not kill)  
Maka na mkpuru onye kuru (Because whatever one sows)  
Ka o ga aghoro (That is what one reaps)

Both the leader of the poetic song and the audience engage in act of singing. The song is poetically rendered with the sole aim of educating people for the general good of the society.

### **RELIGIOUS SONGS**

These are poetic song rendered in the worship to God or gods in the Igbo cultural society. These songs are often lyrical and people dance to their rhythms. The themes border on religious worship or godly virtues. The poems evoke feelings of dedication and trust towards the subject of worship. For example:

Chineke anyi di nma (Our God is good)  
O di nma (He is good)  
Onye kere uwa di nma (The creator of the world is good)  
O di nma (He is good).

Poetry is the expression of communally shared experiences and emotions: individuals ranging from children to adults can orally express these emotions, experiences and feelings in songs. He/she may be expected to act either as a brilliant commentator who turns the general beliefs, feelings and goals into good poetry or as a visionary and guide who looks critically at past communal experiences and gives correction for the future. If he/she is a commentator, then his/her language is expected to be clear and precise; and easily accessible to his/her audience. Thus, he assumes the role of an interpreter whose utterances, songs and chants deepen the collective awareness and appreciation of his/her audience.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is no doubt that the art of oral composition stemmed up from oral tradition. Oral tradition was very strong in early Igbo culture and songs were recited to be performed and enjoyed. Songs or chants sometimes present a simple account of some heroic deeds recited or sang by a bard or minstrel who is gifted in the area of poetry and song. The songs or chants are mastered by the people who in turn render them at any given time. These itinerant bards of African orature often sing of joys and sorrows of their communities. Therefore in this contemporary Igbo cultural milieu, Igbo people still believe that modern Igbo poet should be a communal voice and a commentator who express his/her opinions about human experiences. Virtually everyone engages in this act; thus everyone successfully performs the role of a poet and is sensitive to feel what others feel and express what others express. In conclusion, from a layman's perspective every Igbo person is a poet whether a published or unpublished poet.

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