

## **POETRY AND PUBLIC AWARENESS IN DEMOCRATIC NIGERIA: THE CASE OF IGBO**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Poetry plays very vital role in influencing the life of people, both literate and non-literate. The study of Igbo poetry reveals that poetry contributes towards ensuring everlasting democracy in Nigeria by highlighting various issues that affect the general society. To do this effectively the Igbo poets usually choose satire most of the time as an instrument for creating awareness in the society. In this paper, effort is made at examining some poems with specific reference to Igbo poems with a view to establishing those poems as a veritable medium of propagating ideals in the society using satire as an instrument. To carry out this study effectively, the researcher embarked on library research and studies of books on the related area. Thus adequate information was collected which was used in the writing of the work. Selected Igbo poems used in the work were critically studied. It was observed that the Igbo poets and poetesses are obviously using their literary work to create the necessary awareness that play vital role in sustaining the desired democratic ideals. It is hoped that this study will be useful to everybody, especially to Nigerian leaders and politicians.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Poetry plays very vital roles in influencing the life of people, whether literate or illiterate. Igbo poetry contributes towards the sustenance of democratic ideal views by highlighting various issues that affect the lives of the general public. It informs the public about what is going on in the country and how to change their attitudes towards various events going on within the society. The focus of this paper is to demonstrate that poetry is a veritable medium of creating national awareness and imbibing democratic ideals.

If leaders want to propagate and sustain democratic governance in this country, they have to exploit the talents of the poets. The paper will examine the present situation in Nigeria, and posits that we need reliable leaders to correct the ills and it will concentrate on drawing examples from the works of two Igbo poets and that of one poetess on how poems in the Igbo language contribute towards creating awareness and sustenance of desired democratic ideals.

### **THE DEFINITION OF POETRY**

Poetry is literature and literature is a method of expression; therefore, it means that poetry is a method of expression. Obi (2001:70) defines thus:

defining poetry implies saying how poetry expresses thoughts by means of suggestion and invention. In poetry what is invented or created consists of images, rhythm and sound and these are employed for suggesting what the poet wishes to express.

R.N. Egudu opines that poetry is 'a method of literary expression, which suggest by

means of imagery, rhythm and sound (I.F. Akere asserts that the beauty of a poem will be derived from the appeal of the style of the writer that is the way words, phrases and sentences are employed to create a particular communicative and artistic effect(56)

### **THE PURPOSE OF POETRY**

As we know it, poetry expresses thoughts, ideas, experiences and the feeling or emotion associated with them. This function however, is not peculiar to it as for example, history and political science can equally perform this function and sometimes perform it even better than poetry. This purpose, therefore, of expressing thought and feeling can be considered secondary in poetry it is not the thing said but the method or way in which it is said that characterizes poetry. The aim of this method is the organization of beauty, and that is to say, the expressive or verbal beauty, with the pleasure which results from it. The creation of beauty is so central to poetry that definitions of poetry equate it with beauty.

### **BRIEF SURVEY OF NIGERIAN SITUATION**

Nigeria is bedeviled with ethnicism, political instability and economic depression According to G.C. Egbucha many scholars identify economic mismanagement as the major problem that is hindering development of Nigeria. (171). Ikwubuzo (2002:174) states it this way:

Nigeria is still grappling with a myriad of socio-political and economic problems that impede national development in this period of what some people call our "new democratic experimentation or 'nascent democracy" Even the vices and other negative features that were associated with past military regimes are still prevalent, if not more prominent, in the present democratic dispensation.

The increasing decline of interest in upholding those virtues and norms that sustained our society in the past has given us a new outlook as "a society that excel in the negation of all known civilized norms and behaviour". Rose Acholonu notes that our collective predicament is both caused and compounded by our societal ills, as many Nigerian leaders seem to care less about the welfare of the ruled majority (Acholonu, 135). The developmental problems facing Nigeria include the fact of a disintegrated bourgeoisie or middle class, the near-collapse of our socio-cultural, economic and political systems and structures, seriously weakened by the roles of many of our incompetent, dishonest, corrupt, selfish and unpatriotic leaders. The Igbo poet who is not insensitive to the socio-political realities of his time, regards himself as duty bound, to sensitize his people to the burning issues. The poets through their works point out the numerous imperfections (mostly self-inflicted) in our tragic socio-cultural economic and political systems. Nigeria is today a country that wallows in chaotic confusion, baffling human tragedies, gender violence and discrimination, political instability and unimaginable poverty imposed on the majority by a minority ruling elites.

### **VITAL ROLE OF IGBO POETRY IN CREATING AWARENESS AND SUSTAINING DEMOCRATIC IDEALS**

According to Ikwubuzo (2002:150), a literary artist (in which the poet belongs) can make his work(s) of art an expose of the realities of the issues of life and society.

The artist responds to the prevailing circumstances of his social environment because he is, as opined by Ogungbesan in Egudu (1978:12), "a member of society and his sensibility is conditioned by social and political happenings around him as these issues form part of the substances 'of life which his instinct as a writer must struggle".

The literary artist according to Bradbury (1971:113), has the right to criticize the society as he advocates positive social and political change (113). The modern poets believe that the desired unity, economic and political stability and ethnic harmony in Nigeria cannot be achieved through militant activities which generate confrontations and ignite inter-ethnic clashes. Rather the poets believe that such desired vital needs will be achieved solely by having competent, honest, selfless, patriotic, God-fearing leaders who will be sensitive to the well-being of the ruled masses.

In trying to realize this all important desire, the Igbo poet as a visionary and mirror of his society, who is all out to build a verile society usually uses satire as a literary instrument to correct the ills in his society. In the words of Ugonna (1987:75) satire is:

In Igbo practice ranges from igba ogwu through ikpo iyi, iko onu and iro or igba egwu to ime akaje (exposure to ridicule), mkpari (ridicule) and iji akpara uka ochi (making a laughing-stock of). It may be a distortion, an analogy or a pure fabrication (75).

In other words, self-expression rather than communication is the main objective. The purpose of satire is always to expose an offender to shame, or disgrace with a view to making him behave better. Uzochukwu (2002:5) upholds the above view as he observes that:

On various occasions in Igbo culture, be it in the context of kingship, marriage, childbirth, death, title-taking, moonlight games etc. the poet through satire discourages acts of misdemeanor, through praise encourages rightful behavior in the society, and through admonition gives direct didactic injunctions to the audience. By so doing he upholds the social norms and creates the conducive atmosphere necessary for national development.

Ikeokwu (2002:167) asserts that the poet is not only acclaimed with satiric renditions more than other artists, but equally notes his compactness in language use (71). Abrams (2009:167) also notes that satire is the literary art of diminishing a subject by making, it ridiculous and evoking towards it, attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation or scorn.

Now let us examine two typical poets, Emenanjo and Obienyem; and a poetess, Okediadi. In their poems in *Utara Nti* and *Ije Uwa* they used satire in visioning and carrying out prophetic messages concerning Nigerians and Nigerian society thereby creating awareness which will lead to realizing the desired democratic ideals in Nigeria.

Looking at Emenanjo's "Uko N'Uju" (Scarcity, in the midst of plenty) we observe a lamenting tone over the endless suffering of the poor masses in the midst of plenty. Thus

the poem goes as follows (first, fourth & fifth stanza)

"Ukọ n'Uju"  
Keduzi ka a ga-esi nọdu u'anyim  
Were asọ na-akwọ aka?  
Kedu kwanu ka a ga-esi nọdu n' iyi,  
Kwere ncha o baa anyi n'anya (*Utara Nti* p.19)

(How can we be in the ocean  
And be washing our hands with spittle?  
How can we afford to be in the ocean  
And yet allow soap to enter our eyes?)

Ego a,  
A si na anyi nwere n'ijeli ijeli '  
Bu n'ikuku ka o di  
Ego a,  
A si anyi na o bughị ya bu okwu  
Bu naani n'akwukwo ka o di.

(This money  
We are said to have in billions  
Is only in the air  
This money  
We are told that it is not a problem  
Is only on paper)

Kooro m ihe kpatara na  
Mmadu ga-enwe ebugbere  
Ma anwu ana-ama ya n' eze  
Nri a,  
A si anyi na o bu aturu tawa,  
Ezughị aturu ga-ata

Nke o na-afoduru  
mmadu.

(Tell me why  
Somebody will have lips  
But his teeth will be under the heat of the sun,  
This food  
We are told that it is surplus,  
Is not even enough,  
How much more being surplus.)

The poet effectively uses the sound elements of repetition and rhetorical questions to set the high tone of satire needed for protesting against government lofty ideals which to the poor masses only have prepositional contents and meanings. If the government means what it is saying, why should we be bearing the praise name Giant of Africa", while majority of Nigerians scavenge the dustbins.

In Okediadi's "Ogbo Ogbaraohuru" (new generation) on p. 45 of *Ije Uwa*, we also observe a lamenting tone over the unruly behaviour of the children of this present generation. The poetess observes that this is a dangerous period by mere looking at what is happening among us. Thus the poetess says as follows in the first stanza:

“Ogbo ogbaraohuru”  
Oge a bu ihe di egwu  
Onye lee anya etu ihe si di  
O maa jijiji  
Egwu abia ya n' ahụ

(This period is dangerous"  
If one goes by the way things stand  
He will shiver  
And fear will engulf him).

The poetess observes that the behaviour of the new generation is making people to shiver and entertain fear. From what we see in this present time, the poetess is actually making sense by what she observes with regard to the behaviour of the new generation who according to *The Holy Bible* ( 2 Timothy 3) derives pleasure in taking to violence, because they are lovers of themselves,, haters of God and others, They are criticizers of others. A generation in which many people do not fear God. That is why kidnapping and things like that are the order of the day. In stanza two of the poem, the poetess notes as follows:

Umu ogbo a!  
Umu  
ogbaraohuru!  
Ndi nti fere azu  
Ha anaghi anu ihe ekwe na-aku  
Ndi nnupuisi

(Children of this age!  
Children of new generation  
Who have their ears at the back,  
They don't listen to instruction  
Disobedient children.)

The poetess notes that the children of this age is the children of the new generation and the hallmark of their character is disobedience. They have ears but they are just there for fancy.

In the last stanza of the poem, the poetess notes as follows:

Ogbo a  
Nke juputara n'ihe ojoo di iche iche  
Dika mpu na aghughu  
Ohi na ama  
Ibanye n' otu nzuzo di iche iche  
Bu ogbo jogburu onwe ya.

(This generation,  
That is full of all sorts of evil  
Like abomination and cunning  
Stealing and giving unnecessary information  
joining various secret cults  
It is evil generation).

The poetess observes that the children of the new generation are full of all sorts of evil like abomination and cunning. Actually, this is a period when cultism, armed robbery, gangsterism, drug abuse, sexual immorality, kidnapping, militancy and many other vices are threatening to completely destroy the youths. It is only the mighty hand of God that will deliver our youths from all these evils.

Also in Okediadi's "Politikis" (Politics) p.46 of *Ije Uwa*, the poetess highlights what politics is all about.. She notes the evils associated with politics. Thus the first stanza of the poem goes as follows:

"Politikisi"  
Politikisi!  
Ndoṛoṛoṛo  
oḥiḥi  
Egwuregwu nke di n'ikuku ugbu a  
O mere ihe daa ujo  
Egwuregwu nduhie  
Onye baa na ya  
O mṛta igba ama ugha  
Na igbo aghugho  
A na-ekwu maka taa  
O na-ekwu mata echi.

(Politics!  
Political controversy  
The game that is now in vogue  
Destroyer  
The game that misleads  
If anyone enters you  
He will begin to tell lies and also be cunning  
If you are talking of today  
He will be talking about tomorrow.)

In this poem, the poetess tries to create awareness by means of satire as to what politics entails. She notes that politics is a play that misleads. That if one joins politics, one will learn to tell lies and also practise cunning in order to succeed. The person will begin to view things from a different angle. This type of awareness is very vital because many people usually join politics just to make money without taking their time to know what is involved in it.

In the next stanza, the poetess notes that politics will just come and go, hence she posits as follows:

Politikis!

Ihe so ụbọchị agafe  
Ihe so gị karịrị  
akarị  
Nkwafu ọbara na iri ngarị  
Okwu ụgha na ịla akụ n'iyi

(Politics!  
You just come and go  
You involve many things  
Shedding of blood and taking bribe  
Telling lies and wasting resources.

Actually, politics usually comes and goes. The period of politics is associated with a lot of things. It goes with a lot of noise and evil practices particularly among Nigerians who usually see winning election as a do or die affair. That is why it can be associated with shedding of blood and taking bribe as the poetess asserts. In making manifestoes, many people tell a lot of lies. They make numerous promises which they are not ready to fulfill when they are voted for. Nigerian politics also involves waste of resources. The candidates usually waste a lot of resources. Some even tend to be throwing money to people at the market places for undue recognition. All these makes Nigerian politics to look like a dirty business just as the poetess rightly observes in this poem.

Furthermore, Obienyem in his "Onye Naijiria" (the Nigeria factor), satirizes Nigerians for their misplaced priority. The poet opines that the right sense of values are honesty, hard work, discipline, gentleness etc. All these are hallmarks of greatness, which leave memorable legacy for posterity to emulate. But to the great dismay of the poet, Nigerians seem to be more interested in mundane things.

Hence the poet questions as follows in his three-stanza poem (*Utara Ntị* pg. 57- 58).

Stanza 1:

Moto ole ka i nwere?  
Udi leesi ole ka ị kwara?  
Akpa wonyosi gị di ole?  
Kedu maka eleganza gị?  
Akpati ole ka ha di?

(How many cars have you?  
How many types of lace material do you have?  
What of your eleganza material?  
How many box(es) are they?) ..

However, the poem is a satire on a nation whose values have fallen sharply on the altar of materialism. A materialistic nation where the end justifies the means, as we can see here.

Stanza 2:

Ịna-agba Benzi ka ọ bụ Benli?

Ndị enyi gị nwaanyi di ole?  
Ndị enyi gi nwoke ha di ole?  
Ka o bu naani otu  
Ka gi na ya na-achichi?  
N'obodo ole ka ulo elu gi di?

(Do you drive Benzi or Benli? ..  
How many girl-friends have you?  
How many boy-friends have you?  
Is it only one  
That you are managing with?  
In how many towns are your storey buildings?)

**Stanza 3:**

Eze ndi ole ka i bu?  
Onye na ibe ya,  
Ka i na-amị obara?  
Ego ole ka i nwere n'obodo ndi ocha?  
Mmadu ole na-ahụ gi anya n'otu ubochi?

(Whose king are you?  
Which people are you  
Sucking 'their blood?  
How much money do you have in foreign countries?  
How many people usually come to see you in a day?)

We observe that the wrong sense of value is expanded by Obienyem through a humorous tone, rhetorical question and other literary devices to highlight the rate of moral debasement in the society due to high rate of materialism.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The study calls for a deliberate and systematic rediscovery of man in order to curtail or moderate his excesses. We can also assert that a work of Igbo poetry which is oriental towards the society can be an invaluable instrument in the hand of Igbo poet who functions as a visionary; and as a prophet in his society to create awareness, cultivate and sustain the desired democratic ideals in Nigerian society.

The Igbo poet by virtue of his visionary and prophetic abilities acts like a watchdog and monitors the socio-political, cultural and economic setting in the society. Then from experience and what he anticipated, he tends to educate the people by creating awareness. We have seen this in the examples of Igbo poems used for illustration in this paper. Such work can arouse emotional and mental reactions that may produce practical effect of encouraging positive attitudes that will inspire the desired democratic ideals which will in turn lead to healthy relationship, social harmony, peace and tranquility and national development. In conclusion, if only the society and our leaders in particular can read in between lines of these poems that carry prophetic messages, they can guard against mishaps in the society.



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