

IGBO TRADITIONAL CHANTS: A STUDY OF SYMBOLS IN OGBAGIDIGIDI PERFORMANCE OF OMOR, ANAMBRA STATE.

By

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Abstract

Symbols take the form of words, sounds, gestures, ideas, or visual images and are used to convey other ideas and beliefs. For example: its part symbol represents love, compassion and health. Dove symbol represents peace, love and calm (Hornby, (2010). Symbolism is the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities. It is also an artistic and poetic movement or style using symbolic images and indirect suggestion to express mystical ideas, emotions and states of mind. Symbolism is a movement (ie field of study), that pre-occupies itself with the inner life. It generally avoids sentimentality, rhetoric, narration, direct statement, description of public and political themes, and other didacticism of any kind. Thus, this paper examines the symbols of chanters in some of the Igbo traditional chants vis-à-vis Ogbagidigidi chants of Omor, Anambra State. The paper x-rays the various chants that are used by the Ogbagidigidi chanters to evoke some magical powers among the youths. The chanters wish may be to overcome an enemy, or to achieve success in some endeavour. The relativist theory is adopted analyzing these chants. The relativists theory allows drama to develop according to people's culture. The research finds out that the words being chanted may be believed to have some magical power, or the words may be recited along with the performance of ritual that is believed to have some magical power. The objective of the study is to expose the intrinsic meanings in these chants to the general public. Primary data was collected through observation, participation and interview. The young people would benefit from the study because it would instill in them the doggedness it requires to achieve feats. The study reveals that the pre-occupation of the Ogbagidigidi chanter is essentially to evoke those poetic images that instill in the young men the seriousness and zeal needed in the performance. The paper concludes with a suggestion that these chants be recorded and preserved for future generations.

Introduction

Symbolism is a loosely organized literary and artistic movement that originated with a group of French poets in the late 19th century, it later spread to painting and the theatre, and it influenced the European and American literatures of the 20th century to varying degrees. Symbolist artists sought to express individual emotional experience through the subtle and suggestive use of highly symbolized language (Encyclopedia Britannica). Symbolism originated in the revolt from some French poets against the rigid conventions governing both technique and theme in traditional French poetry, as evidenced in some precise description of Parnassian poetry. The symbolists wished to liberate poetry from its expository functions and its formalized oratory in order to describe instead if the fleeting, immediate sensations of man's inner life and experience.

Symbolism is a movement (i.e field of study), that pre-occupies itself with the inner life. It generally avoids sentimentality, rhetoric, narration, direct statement, description of public and political themes, and other diadacticism of any kind. It marks a fusion of the sensibility and imagination. Symbolist is poetry of indirection, in which objects tend to suggest rather than named, or to be used primarily for an evocation of mood. Ideas may be important but are characteristically presented obliquely through a variety of symbols and must be apprehended largely by intuition and feeling (Preminger, 1965: 112). For Duruaku, (1997:91), symbolism extends the meaning of imaginative substitution. It is a form of imaginative substitution whereby we recognize the cross, for instance, as not merely a symbol of Christ, but of Christianity as a whole. Symbolism therefore enjoys four major characteristics imagination, idirection, obliqueness, and intuition. Though not real in a literal sense, symbolism can influence our lives since it can be a binding force or acquire deeper meaning, thereby eliciting complex responses. Most traditional chants employ symbolism in the description of the actions therein. In Ajanaukwu

festival especially in Ogbagidigidi performance, symbols in a symbolic manner are richly employed in the chants and the masquerades songs.

Ogbagidigidi Performance

These chants are performed by able bodied young men in Omor. Akporoboro (2012) says chants are forms of poetry which are chanted towards the purpose of bringing about a desired state of affairs. The words being chanted may be believed to have some magical powers. The chanter's wish may be to procure a cure for illness, to overcome an enemy, and to achieve success in some endeavours. The people that perform Ogbagidigidi include the Okwomma Age-Grade (where the youth age ended) through the Isi-Agana Age-grade (the beginning of youth). The recognized Age-Grade in Omor are grouped under the classification below:

- i. Oliokuku Age-Grade between Ages 30-36
- ii. Okwuoma Age-Grade between ages 37-44
- iii. Ogbanaeri Age-Grade between ages 45-52
- iv. Ndjichie Nta Age-Grade between ages 53-60
- v. Ndjichie Etiti Age-Grade between ages 61-70
- vi. Ndjichie Ukwu Age-Grade between Ages 71 and above

Isiagana as mentioned above are the youths who are warming up to be classified into Age-Grades after a specified period of time. The above group of people dress like warriors and carry war instruments like matchets, dane guns, sticks of various sizes. They match in groups chanting war songs while imitating warriors who are in a real war situation. The chant below came from one of the interviews chanters.

Chanter: ókólóbía kwéénù ósínó ésiná anyí
 Chorus: ósínó-ésíná anyí
 Chanter: ósínó ésiná anyí
 Chorus: ósínó ésiná anyí
 Chanter: ósínó ésiná anyí
 Chorus: ósínó ésiná anyí
 Chanter: íbóbóóá
 Chorus: hooà

This is a warning to the mischief makers not to try them as they are well fortified enough to face any situation.

Voice: ómōr ná-ékwénú ó bú anyí
 Chorus: ó bú Anyí
 Voice: ó bú Anyí
 Chorus: ó bú Anyí
 Voice: ákánrí
 Chorus: anyí ánúó yá
 Voice: áká ékpé
 Chorus: anyí ánúó yá
 Voice: ébé óbúnà
 Chorus: anyí ánúó yá
 Voice: ígúlúbé éé
 Chorus: hooà

English

Voice: omor shout we are the people
 Chorus: we are the people
 Voice: we are the people
 Chorus: we are the people
 Voice: in the right hand

Chorus: we are there
 Voice: in the left hand
 Chorus: we are there
 Voice: everywhere
 Chorus: we finish them
 Voice: igulubeee
 Chorus: hooa.

They march from their various villages to Ajanaukwu Shrine where they perform one or two war struggles in performance before retiring to the 'Ama' for a more elaborate performance. The chant and the rigorous group procession is called "Ogbagidigidi". During this performance, one member of the Oliokukū Age-Grade carries an Ikpeke" (symbol of strength) with his left hand and it remains there unchanged until the end of the performance. Usually, he leads the procession and he determines the movement of the crew vis-à-vis: crawling, moving in zig-zag or single file etc. Amikwe village arrives the Ajanaukwu Shrine first during Ogbagidigidi. This is because, the Ajanaukwu inhabits in their village. After they had gone and come out, Orenja, Aturia, and Akanator goes in that order. This is done in the morning of the Ajanaukwu day as they must finish and come back in the evening for the actual performance.

Important symbols in Ogbagidigidi Chants

Some of the important symbols in Ogbagidigidi chants are as expressed below.

Akporoboro (2012) says chants are forms of poetry which are chanted towards the purpose of bringing about desired state of affairs. The words being chanted may be believed to have some magical powers, or the words may be recited along with the performance of a ritual that is believed to have some magical powers. The chanter's wish may be to procure for an illness, to overcome an enemy, and to achieve success in some endeavour. What is worth noting is that this form of recitation often possesses intrinsic literary qualities of either form, structure or imagery, and even intent they tend to portray.

The pre-occupation of Ogbagidigidi chant is essentially to evoke some poetic images that instill in the young men the seriousness and zeal needed in the performance. The Ogbagidigidi chanter is fully involved in Igbo milieu. Practically all aspects of Igbo life and a smattering knowledge of societal and cultural issues come under his focus. Here, the researcher is going to consider certain thematic elements that are in the form of symbolic representations.

Symbol of Heroes in Ogbagidigidi chant

As soon as the able bodied young men, Umuokobia, arrives the Ogbagidigidi square (Ama), for the performance, the solo chanter starts his business by singing praises to both the performers and the Ajanaukwu deity. In so doing, he employs all sorts of epithets that symbolize the attributes of warriors:

- a. íyóó Mágáńgá
- b. mágáńgá Mágáńgá
- c. mágáńgá bù égwù ikè
- d. úmú Ányí, Ányí jì émé ónú
- e. únù kwòlù gává
- f. ó kwá únú ká Ányí jí ábá?
- g. únù Vùlù ògú jú nílí
- h. mélé nà Óbì ánaló étí Ányí étí
- i. ájánáúkwú éé !
- j. gí bù nká ákpà nà-éshí ánúánú
- k. ó dí mfé ányí áló
- L. ùta ágbalụ afọ ọ maa nkwo
- m. ívùkwàlì úmù gí n' irú gí?
- n. óò vá mélé óbòdò níné jí átúlú ányí égwù
- o. ónyé újọ nǎá
- p. màkà nà égwù élugó

English version

- a. íyóó Mágángá
- b. mágángá Mágángá
- c. mágángá is a war dance
- d. our children we are proud of you
- e. move on in mass
- f. you are the people we depend on.
- g. you chose war in place of food
- h. for this we can never tremble
- i. ájánáúkwú ee!
- j. you are the old bag that smells meat
- k. you are light and heavy
- l. you are the arrow that was aimed at Afọ but it hit Nkwọ
- m. do you see your children in front of you?
- n. it is for this men that all communities dread us
- o. cowards should depart
- p. this is action time

Intuitive meaning of the expressions are as follows:

- a. íyóó – War
- b. war war
- c. war has come
- d. our warriors we are proud of you
- e. identify yourselves
- f. you are our strength
- g. you fight round the clock without food
- h. this is why we win wars
- i. ajanaukwu ee (Incantation)
- j. you are the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.
- k. you are gentle and harsh
- l. you are invisible
- m. the warriors are gathered before you
- n. the coward should leave
- o. for it is time for warriors to show themselves.

These are examples of and symbols images, which a good chanter employs at this stage of the performance. Such descriptive epithets in (g) unu vùlụ ọgụ jù nli (you saw war and reject food) shows how dedicated they are protecting their community. Also, the Ajanaukwu efficacy is described in (j), (k), and (i). Nkanka akpa na-eshi anụ - This symbolizes aged but verile and active individual which is what Ajanaukwu symbolizes. K' ọdị mfe anyị alọ - this is a descriptive epithet which symbolizes Ajanaukwu as good and bad. The Ajanaukwu is believed ti gave the capacity to punish an enemy she sees tormenting the underground. (l) ụta agbalụ Avọ ọ maa Nkwọ - symbolizes the invisibility of Ajanaukwu. It sees in the dark and does not reason in line with men. It passes its judgment in fairness.

These epithets when employed, make the performers to be highly spiritually and become more committed to the performance. One would notice some performers at this stage demonstrate how they had killed human beings (at this stage) or even dangerous animals like Leopard (of course, they carry its dried head during the performance). Some of the words or expressions symbolize things other than their original meaning. For instance, Maganga as seen in (a), (b) and (c) symbolize war. It may have been because of the various technical movements that are employed in a war situation. Also, the world nkanka in (j) is an expression that symbolizes old age. In the same way, the egwu in (p) equally symbolizes action time.

The symbol of Weakness and Lack

The image of weakness, gives the idea that weak ones are unable to resist hard attack is one of the features that come within the compass of Ogbagidigidi chants. Sometimes, the leader who is expected to lead throughout the performance is pushed down in the progress of the struggle. If this happens, the person who pushes him down would replace him. This is the essence of this performance, to identify the strong ones who can lead troops in war circumstances. The person who maintains a permanent leader throughout the performance is adjudged the strongest. As a result, the position is keenly contested for that all kinds of mischief are employed to see that the leader is pushed down. It may happen that a leader is pushed down after a very short period of his leadership in the performance, such situations give rise to memories of the past. This time, the great men of valour who had passed away are remembered.

- a. ókólóbíá ánáá
- b. mádù ánozíkwá?
- c. ó búlú mgbé.énú bụ àná ósá
- d. mgbé Ókéké ájọ́ ánú vá nò
- e. ònyé zùlù íkwátú. yá ?
- f. únú échétékwáí Mádúká Ágú?
- g. ókólì nwá Ókávó
- h. í nózíkwá nsó?
- i. nwavò nwá Mgbéójíkwé
- j. bìakwá na álú éméé

English version

- a. strong men have gone
- b. are men no longer there?
- c. if it were to be when men were men
- d. the time of Okeke the dreaded animal
- e. who can push him down?
- f. do you remember Maduka the lion?
- g. okorie the son of Okavọ
- h. are you around?
- i. nwavọ the son of Mgbéojikwe
- j. come for the abomination is done.

The following are what the lines could possibly be representing

- (a) And (b) – regrets about the departure of men of war
- (c) Remembering the days past when these men were active
- (d) The days of Okeke the dread animal
- (e) Nobody dare challenge the community
- (f) The memory of Maduka the lion is remembered
- (g) Okorie the son of Okavọ (another warrior) is being invited
- i. Regrets the absence of Nwavọ in the performance
- j. Total sign of displeasure

In this chant, the chanter is philosophizing the effect of death. He has left him with a serious lack of men of valour and process that whose presence would have made a world of difference. Naturally, the Igbo people like to associate somebody's feat with his name (may be as nick name). The chanter employs this as he beckons on all the fallen heroes. For instance, in (d) Okeke ajọ́ anụ ... Here, Ajọ́ anụ (dreaded animal) symbolizes valour, prowess and indefatigability. This is also the case in (f) and (i) where such descriptive epithets like Agụ and Mgbéojikwe were used respectively. They symbolize virility and stubbornness respectively. In fact, when a chanter was asked, he explained that Mgbéojikwe was very stubborn during his time that he goes to the extent of challenging people to wrestling bouts at the end of the performance which he must have led all through. Maduka Agụ on his part inherited that descriptive epithet Agụ, as a result of his continuous lead in the performance for three consecutive years running (for keeps). It was the chanter who described him as such in one of his chants before others joined in calling him Maduka Agụ.

Importance of Events in Ogbagidigidi

It seems very plausible to argue that any thematic situation gives rise to its own poetry.

- a. úmúókólóbíá élúlé élúlé
- b. mákwálí ná-égbúó dike n'ógú únò
- c. n'ógú ézí ákwáwá émélí máká yá.
- d. ó kwá á rìólú ndí ná-áchí ányí gbùdólú Ányí óké ànà
- e. vá áráá nyá ná-éké-égó Ányí ná Vá
- f. ñgwó áyá dí iché iché á ná-ábátá n'óbódó.
- g. ívé á ná-áchó bụ ònyé gá-ékwú
- h. kà é wólú ónyóó gbálú ísì ndí ódó
- i. kàmá ríchéé dáchíé úzò.
- j. kàm búlú ónú ágú
- k. úmúókólóbíá ñgwákwánú
- l. ná ñkwúchá ábúló újò
- m. ónyé íké gwùlù pùtá
- n. kà ndí ódó ñédó ñédó
- o. mmánwú dálú ádá náá
- p. kà óbòdò ñédó ónyé ódó

English version

- a. youths take it easy
- b. know it that a warrior who is killed in a local war
- c. is regretted in time of need (external aggression)
- d. we asked those that rule us to adjust our boundaries
- e. they left it and proffered sharing our money among themselves.
- f. whereas different types of war ammunitions troop into the villages
- g. what they are looking for is who will talk
- h. so that he will be used as a scape – goat
- i. instead of fallen on the road after a heavy meal
- j. i will rather remain hungry
- k. youths back to business
- L. for it is wise to be vigilant
- m. if you are tired, surrender
- n. let others try
- o. the fallen masquerade should go
- p. so that people watch another

Some of the expressions above are very symbolic and would be appreciated most at the level of contextual application. The following meanings are suggested for the expressions:

In (a), *Umukolobija* there symbolizes strong and virile youths. It is not just youths for the weakling cannot qualify as *Okolobija* in that context.

In (b) and (c), the expressions are symbols of cause and effect which encourage a more careful approach to the performance. (d), (e), (f), (g), (h), are lamentations against bad government. Whereas (i) and (j) expresses the fact that it is better to be poor than to acquire all the riches in the world and die a shameful death. The expressions in (k) and (l) symbolizes the need to plan ahead of time. (m), (n), (o), and (p), are advice that the leaders should resign their positions and allow others to try which when summarized means a simple vote of no confidence on the leaders of our government.

Most of these chants are chanted in a high tone hence, it is meant to ginger the youths into action. Most of the step and low tones as noticed in the tone marking bears their natural and permanent tones that an alteration would render them meaningless in the dialect of the performance. Ogbagidigidi festival chant

is a super performance that attracts a lot of accolades from the audience. When the chanter is skilled in the arts, he brings in both old and new occurrences in the village into his chant.

Conclusion

Ogbagidigidi performance is one of the most popular form of art expressions to watch. As a genre of performing arts, they utilize the performance idiom in a fashion that is radically unique, using all or most of the art of dance, music, song, drama and mime in a most organic gestalt.

In this way, Ogbagidigidi is essentially theatrical as it involves the performance of significant actions before an immediate live audience. As a communal and absolutely flexible performance art, and Ogbagidigidi chanter easily adopt new idioms of performance. As the community encounters new experiences, the chanter imbibes these experiences and reflects them in performing in the chants.

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