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Patriarchal Reductionism in *Ewu- Nzuzo* of *Ogodi* Female Burial Dance of the *Ogbaru-Igbo*

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Abstract

The Ogbaru Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria perform a ceremonial dance drama to honour indigenously born women upon their death, during which a ritual nanny goat is slaughtered. This paper examines the purpose of the dance and the significance of the ritual animal. The study reveals a dual purpose of the ceremony; the stated and explicit on the one hand; and the implicit and unstated on the other, the latter being disguised by the patriarchal agenda of the culture. There is a dearth of information on the woman in patriarchal society and what little is available is subject to patriarchal hegemony. Oral performance remains one of the most accessible channels on gender related data and the present study aims to bridge the gap in gender documentation.

Key Words: *Ewu-nzuzo*, Ogbaru, Igbo, *Umuada*, patriarchal

Introduction

The Igbo is a patrilineal, patrilocal and polygynous society. However, according to Amadiume, (1987),

either sex could fill a male gender role and prior to the coming of Christianity, a prominent Igbo woman could take titles and acquire wives. These wives freed their female and male husbands from domestic work and helped them accrue wealth in their businesses. Wealthy and influential Igbo women asserted themselves in women's groups, including those of lineage daughters, lineage wives and a community wide women's council led by titled women. The high status and influence of Igbo women depended on the separation of males from local subsistence and on a marketing system that encouraged women to leave home and gain prominence in distribution and through these accomplishments-in politics.

Still, as a patriarchal society, women are excluded from the cultural right to patrilineal inheritance. However, it is observed that among some Igbo groups, women exert power and influence in the affairs of their indigenous communities which reflects a greater social relevance, relative to general patriarchal presentation of women in regional dialectal groups. Specifically, among some Igbo groups such as the Ogbaru Igbo, women partially retain their patrilineal ties and rights, after betrothal (which ordinarily should sever the patrilineal link on the incidence of the exchange of dowries). Consequently, while the woman resides with her consanguine relatives during her lifetime, upon her death, the body is returned to her patrilineal origin. This duality of identity makes it mandatory that the woman be buried in her paternal community.

The origin of the practice of returning the corpse of deceased women to their patrilineal communities may be traceable to the Industrial Revolution (19th-20th Century), a period preceding the colonial emancipation of West Africa, and an era which influenced many social changes in traditional African communities. As the source of labour took a dramatic turn from the use of slaves in European plantations, following the ban on the Trans-Trans Atlantic slave, (15th, 16th and 18th centuries), to that of the oil- palm as the new source of energy for the machines of the economies of the era, the oil-palm rich regions of the Niger Delta were besieged by European merchants. Their

patronage gave rise to a booming economy in this region, and paved the way for the rise of great kingdoms such as Osomala and Aboh, and the wars which were fought as a result of the rivalry for the control of the River Niger and its tributaries as trade routes of the region. This new economic order of the River Niger basin produced social dynamics which ultimately redefined gender roles to serve the tension-fraught rivalries. Since a woman's social prestige increased when she contributed to the domestic income (Harding, 1975; Kottak, 1990), the status of the Ogbahu woman rose as women emerged as prominent traders in the oil palm trade. The men of the Niger kingdoms communities left the trading and sustenance of the family was left to the women as they were more involved in the inter-communal wars as soldiers.

As part of the grand plan to sustain the strength of powerful kingdoms, indigenous women (*Umuada*), were given away to rival communities with the condition that these wives be allowed to visit their patrilineal home periodically. The women served their communities of origin by secretly obtaining confidential information from their consanguine communities to aid the patrilineal. This crop of women was known as *ada-eji-eje-mbah* meaning 'diplomatic relations daughters'. Powerful kingdoms secured political ties with rival ones through inter-marriage between the offspring of rulers. In a culture in which a woman belongs to her husband's people, upon betrothal women lived in great fear for their lives once given out in marriage, since the culture gave full rights to the man over his wife. As Miller (1997) notes,

When a woman lives in her own village, she has kin nearby to look after and protect her interests. Even in patrilocal, polygenous settings, women often count on the support of their co-wives and sons in disputes with potentially abusive husbands. Such settings, which tend to provide a safe haven for women is retracting in today's world.

When the marriage is to a man from a distant land, the woman had more reason to worry as it would be difficult to check such abuse from a spouse. The right to occasionally visit her people and enjoy the partially retained identity of her birth place was of great importance to the woman. Understandably, such a woman felt greater allegiance to her people than to the husband's community. The need of the patrilineal origin to ensure the loyalty of these women is a possible motivating factor for the dual identity

bestowed on the *umuada* among the Ogbaru people. Gender identity, in this case is the result of economic and socially negotiated boundaries, with existing cultural tenets tactically ignored. Once again the patriarchal interests, disguised as communal survival is served.

Dance as Metaphor in Ritual Theatre

The purpose of a dance performance finds meaning only in the act of dance itself (Layiwola, 1991). This is especially true of performance which depends on gesture as the major channel of communication. Within the traditional performance genre, ritual dance theatre falls within this category as it attempts to rationalize what is unexplainable to man and therefore uncontrolled. As Niccols,(96) observes, traditional dance has a functional orientation aimed at the realization of social outcomes external to the context of the performance, and its characteristic gestures and locomotion are determined by the socio-cultural purposes it fulfils whereas, the primary role of modern dance is recreation and entertainment .

Theatre as a part of ritual dance drama in African ceremonies is only the external factor, as dance movements communicate salient messages to the consumer society of which entertainment is only one (Ibitokun,1991). The dance progression is often divided into stages which individually indicate a message and the stage in the given transitional process. Hence, within a ritual festival, the sequence and character of the component events are determined by purposes relative to the larger world view. In other words, the purpose of a festival in terms of the socio-cultural context determines the form of the activities. African dance as an avenue of expression is therefore closely related to the themes and purposes of a particular occasion, and is in effect, context-determined. Thus, a funeral performance possesses the positive tendency to retain its original purpose and a relative purity of form. The advantage of this is that while popular forms metamorphous with secular demands (thereby losing most of the antecedental data), a rite of passage performance, on the other hand, by retaining its original functionality becomes an invaluable source of data for research and scholarship. Olademo (2009) highlights this importance of the oral form when she asserts that

Oral literature comprises a compendium of information on a peoples' living experience, including their historical, political, economic and spiritual pursuits. Oftentimes, normative paradigms of a given group of people are embedded within the oral literature in such a society.

Performance in terms of music, recitation and dance is often a basic feature of oral literature. Indeed, in Africa, few oral performances are chanted without some form of performance. Oral literature serves the purpose of record keeping for the society.

With reference to gender research, much has been done and is still ongoing towards the evaluation and documentation of performance in African societies, but little on funeral dance performances for deceased women. Most of the gender based performances, including the traditional and popular forms, while demonstrating the entertainment and didactic function, upon second scrutiny, seem to be ultimately disguised to serve patriarchal interests, thereby suggesting duplicity of purpose. Performances celebrating womanhood often possess explicit and implicit interests. The first and explicit is the apparent purpose to laud and celebrate womanhood, while implicit and disguised in the ceremony is the patriarchal purpose to suppress awareness, initiative and rebellion in the female gender. Thus, while gender roles are supposedly guided by the need for the maintenance of law and order in society, the patriarchy exploits this for the distribution of gender roles in society. Kottak (2008) notes the tendency for men to be more aggressive than women in most patriarchies and many of the differences in attitude and behaviour are dictated by culture and not by biology. Hence, gender refers to the cultural construction of male and female characteristics in a culture (Rosaldo, 1960*b*). Such “virtues” as ‘obedience’, ‘good cheer’, ‘spousal care’ and so on are lauded as noble ideals for the woman, while aggressive behaviour, tagged as courage and strength is a basic expectation of the male counterpart in many patriarchies. Olademo(2009) questions,

Who determines what roles are for the male and female?
In many countries these group of lawmakers is composed of males who subscribe to the principles of patriarchy and perpetuate it. Gender then cannot be a neutral phenomenon for its contents at any given time is linked with the agenda of the ‘lawmakers’

Kolawole (1998) has reiterated that many oral literature genres are women’s domain. Therefore, for gender related research, dance performance is perhaps one of the most valuable sources of information on the woman in many African societies, and sometimes the only source in patriarchal communities where there is little or no documentation on the woman. As most of such

female oriented performance forms depend largely on the patriarchal sanction and scrutiny of the society, it is important that the data be carefully studied to reveal disguised intentions that serve patriarchal hegemony.

Theoretical framework

The analysis of this work employs the Peircian Semiotic concept of language as a system of signs which embraces all communication systems, including the verbal and non-verbal. Semiotics as an off-shoot of Structuralist philosophy gives equal importance to all forms of communication (Seldon, 1989) and is therefore relevant for the analysis of this study because of the density of symbolism employed in communication (Elam, 1963). Considering that the Feminist approach is that of Womanism (Ogunyemi, 1985), a theory which examines the woman's experience from an African perspective, the approach may be said to be that of Symbolic Womanism. Its relevance is determined by the density of theatrical icons and symbols used in this study.

Ogodi Dance and the *ewu-nzuzo* tradition

The origin of the *Ogodi* dance is not clear as there are many accounts. One account states that in the olden days, when little was known about the distant regions beyond the community dwelling, it was near impossible and always difficult to communicate with daughters of the community who were married to non-indigenous men, especially those of distant lands. To put a check on the possible battery and abuse of these women, a suitor was given the conditions that the suitor must inform the bride's parents, if she should become critically ill so that family members can pay a visit; that she should be allowed to visit her parents from time to time especially in the incidence of her parent's illness and death; that her body must be returned to be buried with her family and community ancestors in the event of her death. The practice has since been incorporated into tradition and continues to the present day. Another account states that while burial ceremonies are performed for all community members, the type and detail will depend on the sex and age of the deceased. This is predicated on the philosophy of Ogbaru people who believe that the dead travel to the ancestral world to continue existence with other departed community members. In a situation where appropriate rite is not performed for an individual, the deceased cannot take the rightful social position in the ancestral community. Such a spirit is therefore unhappy with the living for being denied what is considered a right. Depending on the temperamental disposition of the spirit, this grievance is

often conveyed through dreams, reincarnation, and sickness of the one whose duty it is to perform the rites. This information is often revealed through divination and then it becomes necessary to perform the ceremony to forestall the anger of the ancestors. All mature members of the community are therefore given appropriate burial rites. In the case of the burial of a deceased woman, the ceremony is more elaborate because she had left her family for such a long time, that there is a heightened emotion of joy at the reunion with her people albeit spiritually. This is therefore a source of joyful celebration. An important reason for the insistence on the return of the body of deceased women is to check the battery of wives by abusive husbands. If the deceased's husband has a record of cruelty to his wife, and also uncaring of his in-laws' welfare, the woman's family is naturally suspicious of the cause of death. This is why the bodies brought in from outside the community need to be inspected while that of women married within are not.

The ceremony is the celebration of the spirit of the deceased woman of indigenous birth (*nwada*), as she returns to her kinsmen. The dance is divided into five (5) sections, each symbolizing a stage in the spiritual journey of the deceased to rest among the dead of her community. For the purpose of this analysis, however, we shall divide the entire dance ceremony into two sections; one section representing the dances preceding the presentation and slaughter of the *Ewu-nzuzo*; and the other, the dances following the slaughter of the ritual animal. The first dances are the **arrival dance**, **announcement dance**, the women's dance and the **ada's dance**. The arrival dance features the friends and relatives of the deceased's husband marching in single file into the town on arrival for the ceremony, singing the praises of the deceased. The announcement dance which follows is performed by the community's members, mostly male who fall below the age of the deceased. These are followed respectively by the performance of the *ndiomu* (community wives) and that of the *ada* (eldest daughter of deceased). There follows a pause in the performance during which a nanny goat is presented by the in-laws representative. Mock negotiations follow in which the deceased family complains about the poor quality of the animal presented and subsequently accept some cash compensation. Next, the animal is given some vegetable to feed on to enable the relaxation of the neck muscles and then beheaded at a stroke of a razor sharp cutlass. This action is followed by the cheering of the spectators and initiates the last two sections of the dramatic performance. The slaughter sets off the motion for the performance of the second section of the

dances. The **Homebound dance** and the **Oge-Ato** (three Seasons) praise singing follow.

The Ambiguities in *Ogodi* dance and the *Ewu-Nzuzo*

The presentation of the goat as part of the items in rites of passage, especially marriages in Africa is quite common. The Igbo people, here being studied present a goat as part of the presents from the bride's family to the suitor's. Among the *Krobos* people, a goat is slaughtered and used to bath the feet of the initiate during puberty rites. Among the *Keiyo*, a goat is slaughtered and eaten as part of the ceremony initiating the youth into the warriors guild. Many other cultures feature the slaughter of a goat during rites of passage as either entertainment or as symbolic offering to the gods or ancestral spirits depending on the religious orientation of the group. However, the goat is sometimes a symbol or icon of the bride as it entails among the Igbo people. Among the Ogbaru Igbo people, with particular reference to *Osomala*, the case study in this work, a nanny goat is presented and sacrificed midway through the funeral dance celebrating the death of the woman as part of the ceremony.

Two things raise questions in the performance of *Ogodi* dance in relation to the decapitation of the *ewu-nzuzo*. The first is that the decapitation ceremony is the only section of the ritual performance which does not feature a dance as a meaning projector, while all other dramatic enactments of the deceased's journey are rendered in stylized dance dynamics geared towards communicating the stages and activities on that journey. Thus, the messages before and after the decapitation of the ritual animal are 'danced'. Secondly, it is interesting to note that the dances preceding the slaughter of the *ewu-nzuzo* (nanny goat) are mournfully rendered, whilst those following it reflect a joyful and lighter mood. This suggests the presence of conflict in the ceremonies preceding the slaughter of the nanny goat, hence the somber mood and tone, on the one hand; and the resolution of this situation, initiated by the slaughter of the ritual animal which results in the joyful mood of the ceremonies following the slaughter on the other hand. One wonders what explanation there is for this. We have to remember that much of what is being communicated in this ceremony is in non-verbal dance dynamics. Our interpretation and understanding is thus dependent on visual and auditory perception of symbolic content. According to tradition, the plot of the dramatic enactment is the return of the deceased daughter of the community to rest with her kinsmen. The logical expectation is a joyful celebration all

through the ceremony. An ambiguity is presented when the two opposite emotional spectrum is reflected, with the *ewu-nzuzo* being the marginalizing line.

Again, the presentation and treatment of the ritual animal raises questions about the purpose of the entire ceremony. In the first instance, the goat is female. Second, it is negotiated over between the family of the deceased and that of the in-laws, which replicates the process of negotiation over the bride price of a woman in this culture. Having returned the body of the deceased to the kinsmen, what is the reason for the presentation of the nanny goat? The reason is not clear but it is not difficult to deduce that the animal is either a symbol, or an icon of the deceased woman. The animal is then slaughtered. Again, why slaughter something which apparently represents one way or the other the revered deceased figure of the *nwada*? Is the animal carcass buried along with the deceased, simply discarded or reared by the deceased's relative perhaps in memory of the *nwada*? The nanny goat is neither buried with the deceased, whom it represents, nor is it thrown away; it is cooked and exclusively eaten by the male relations of the deceased's family. It is this presentation and treatment of the nanny goat which present ambiguities about the perception of the *umuada* and raise questions about possibly disguised intentions which are more complex than the simple need to honour a deceased daughter of the community in this culture.

An excursion into the worldview of the Ogbaru people could shed some light on this conflict. Ordinarily, upon betrothal, a woman belongs to her consanguine family and community as the Ogbaru people do not have a place for the woman in the rank of ancestors. Considering the partially retained patriarchal identity of the Ogbaru *nwada* predicated on the great service she renders to her community in allegiance, what is the posthumous status of the deceased on the incidence of her death? In fact there is no place in the ancestral schema for the woman. This implies that the woman is not represented among the emblems of ancestral worship. Hence, the deceased ceases to exist in both worlds of the community universe; the world of the living and that of the ancestors. This presents a conflict. Is the slaughter and consumption of the nanny goat by the kinsmen an attempt to resolve the inherent conflict created by this ambiguity of the deceased's identity? This would appear to be the guiding principle of the entire ceremony. The purpose of the ceremony may thus be guided by two reasons; the first and explicit purpose is to celebrate the passage of a valued daughter of the community and thereby solicit and encourage the same allegiance from the living women

of the community. Implicit within the ceremony, however, is the second, disguised attempt to resolve the conflict of the posthumous identity of the woman. If her spirit cannot reside with the exclusively male inhabited ancestral world and is left in limbo, the community is put at risk of the anger and subsequent harm by the offended spirit. It is logical to conclude that the ceremony is an attempt to resolve this conflict by 'eating' her in the ritual goat, thereby conquering the fear of retribution by the angered spirit of the deceased. This need to inhibit inherent fear through ritual dance has been studied by Layiwola (1991), who notes that

Man has often used dance performances as an occult game of communication between his own spirit and the cosmos whenever he seeks a deeper understanding of its mysteries. In this sense, he ensures that he is not a loser in the ensuing interaction, but a mutual beneficiary in the exchange of ritual potency. He draws a hitherto rebellious universe to himself, establishes a greater rapport with it, or rather contextualizes it, and manages or tames its terror. The end of any performance in dance or drama often results in man gaining a better understanding of a perplexing universe and reconciling himself to reality. In this way, he feels better, and feels at greater peace with himself.

We infer from the analysis of the function of Ogodi dance, an agenda by the patriarchal hegemony of Ogbaru culture to adduce a simple explanation for the celebration of the deceased *nwada*; that is to honour the deceased for her contribution to her community. This disguises the more complex issue of where to relocate the deceased spirit and the conflict which arises. This conflict is resolved through the representation of the deceased in the nanny goat, defeating the fear through the decapitation and by eating the animal, a psychological closure is achieved. The act brings a psychological closure to the conflict. This defeat of the fear is celebrated in the dance which leads to the interment of the body.

It becomes clear that Ogodi funeral dance is not motivated simply by the obvious need to honour an important community daughter, but is rather a carefully disguised agenda to resolve the conflict of the duality of identity created in the first instance by the patriarchal hegemony of the culture..

Conclusions

This study reveals that social relevance determines gender prestige and status in any given culture, The Igbo gender model of the woman stands out among patrilineal, patrilocal cultural stereotypes found in corresponding patrimonies. It is deduced in this study that the guiding factor for the funeral dramatic enactment is the need to acknowledge the woman's contribution to her community. This does not however, explain the inclusion and slaughter of the ritual nanny goat. As a culture which makes no accommodation for the woman in the ancestral realm, the plausible reason is clearly the need to manage this conflict through the presentation of the symbolic spirit (the nanny goat), the defeat of the fear of possible retribution by the angered spirit (decapitation), and the restoration of male dominance through the exclusive consumption of the ritual feast. Thus the psycho-social equilibrium of the community is regained.

Rites of passage is as important to man in today's tension driven lifestyle, and perhaps more so than it was in indigenous society. The literature on rites of passage constantly stresses the psycho-social function of dance in passage rites, where oral performance events often confront realistic expression either by "explaining it or rationalizing it" (Layiwola, 91). Unfortunately, the continued expansion of industrial urban civilization has produced extensive changes in our social system which has led to the neglect of the rites of passage in the life of modern man (Spencer, 1965). Prominent among these changes have been increased secularization and the decline in the importance of sacred ceremonies. He opines that rites of passage were often, but not necessarily, tied to supernatural sanctions and to the activity of priestly intermediaries. Although such rites focused on the individual, they were also occasions for group participation such as initiation ceremonies and burial or marriage rites in an agrarian community. No data exists which suggest that a secularized urban world has lessened the need for ritualized expression of an individual's transition from one status to another. Obviously, ceremonialism alone cannot establish the new equilibrium, and perfunctory rituals may be pleasant but also meaningless. One of our problems is that we are lacking the empirical studies of ritual behavior and its consequences for life-cycle crises upon which we might assess the relation between crises and ritual in its current setting.

This deficiency is related to another. The scientific interest in religion of a half-century ago seems to have dwindled in the academia, although a few

sociologists are now evincing an interest in the social aspect. Occasional essays on the subject emerge in the literature of social science, but the field has been left almost entirely to the theologians. It would seem that the time has come when theories and techniques which have been developed in the last quarter century of the last century might be applied to this subject with rewarding results. Such studies would be concerned not with religion per se but with the nature and function of symbolism in relation to social and individual behaviour. Rites of passage would constitute one segment of the problem.

But rites of passage deserve attention within themselves. The critical problems of becoming male and female, of relations with the family, and of passing into old age and death are directly located to the devices which the society offers the individual to help him achieve the new adjustment. Somehow we seem to have forgotten this-or perhaps the ritual has become so completely individualistic that it is now found for many only in the privacy of the psychoanalyst's couch. The evidence, however, does not bear out the suggestion. It seems much more likely that one dimension of mental illness may arise because an increasing number of individuals are forced to accomplish their transition alone and with private symbols. Our basic problem may then be seen as that of the nature of individual crisis. If we define it thus and shift our emphasis from description of the idiosyncratic to the cultural and social regularities in relation to individual deviancy, we have the foundation on which many disciplines could cooperate. For societies such as that of the Igbo people, here being reviewed, rites of passage may mean more than just a marking of an individual's passing; it is an opportunity for group participation in the death rite to which every man is destined to succumb. Individual grief becomes communally expressed and shared, strengthening the communal bonding.

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