

THE MYTHOLOGICAL PHENOMENON OF DEATH IN ESIABA IROBI'S *THE FRONDED CIRCLE*: A METAPHOR FOR GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

*Death is the surest reality ever known to man. Through various ways, the Igbo of South East Nigeria, like other ethnic nationalities, express their fear of, disenchantment about, as well as view and understanding of the reality of death as an end to every human person. In very many ways people go the extra mile to attempt to deny, postpone or avoid their death. One of such is the Ike Isi- an age long practice adopted for the extension of earthly life. This practice provides the material for Esiaba Irobi's play *The Fronded Circle*. This paper, through social-cultural analysis, x-rays Esiaba Irobi's perception of the mythological phenomenon of death in his locality which he uses to make generalizations on the Igbo cosmology. The paper discovers that a sub-textual reading of *The Fronded Circle* reveals that the play is Esiaba Irobi's parable on modern day governance in Nigeria and, by extension, Africa. It cautions about the Ike Isi syndrome (sit-tightism) in governance in our contemporary society.*

Introduction

Among the Igbo of South East Nigeria, death is one phenomenon that no one would usually want to discuss. Death is the surest reality ever known to man. In the midst of life, we are in death. The certainty the Igbo place on death as the end to every human person is

further explained by the age long adage that “igwe nile ga aga na uzu” (every living person must die). Yet, death is widely dreaded and most people adopt some denial stance to postpone the thought of having to die one day. The phenomenon called death is referred to as ‘*Onwu*’ in Igbo land. Several Igbo names are assigned to people to express the people’s inordinate fear for, disenchantment about, and/or the reality of death as the end to every human person. Some of such common names include, but not limited to: *Onwudinjo* (death is evil), *Onwubiko* (death please), *Onwuanaegbule* (death do not kill yet or death has been killing), *Onwukwe* (if death permits), *Onwubuariri* (death is grief), *Onwukamike* (death is mightier than I), *Onwudiwe* (death is annoying), *Onwuzuruike* (death should rest), *Onwuamaghionyeukwu* (death does not know the mighty), *Onwughara* (death forgive/leave), *Onwudire* (death is a certainty), *Onwuegbuchulem* (death do not kill me prematurely), *Onwuenwenyi* (death has no friend). These names show that the people can go the extra mile to postpone their death or even avoid it if they have the power. Death is a phenomenon not liked by any person.

Death in Igbo Cosmology

The *Igbo* accept the reality of death with the expression ‘*The nwere mbido nwere njedebe/nkwusi*’ (whatever has a beginning has an end) (Ezikeojiaku, 2008:37). Like other cultural groups in the world, death is not a likeable phenomenon among the *Igbos*. To *Ndi Igbo*, “life is the

highest value in the people's perception of reality" (Kalu, 2002:356). In contemporary *Igbo* land, Christianity has fostered a sense of death which, according to Opata, (1998:174) "makes it a finality that leads either to Heaven or to Hell. It has equally promoted the idea that death is some type of eternal sleep in the bosom of God".

Among the traditional *Igbo*, death is a form of separation and transition to another world from where the dead can come back to the world of the living. J.S. Mbiti's view of what death means to the African best explains the *Igbo* world view of death- "a separation and not an annihilation; the dead person is suddenly cut off from the human society and yet the corporate group clings to him. This shows through the elaborate funeral rites as well as other methods of keeping in contact with the departed" (1996:46). Death is not a permanent end of life as far as *Ndi Igbo* is concerned. It is a return to where life emanated. This views death as a transition, and the belief in reincarnation help the *Igbo* cope with death when it occurs. They also form myths about the genesis of death- all in the bid to sooth grieving minds. In one of the tales, there was no death initially. Fascinated by the idea of living forever, the people appealed to the gods to guarantee eternal life. The outcome of a marathon race between the frog and the dog was to determine the final decision. The dog represented life while the frog was for death. During the race, the frog continued at a non-stop slow pace while the dog ran fast but stopped at intervals

to eat garbage from trashes. At the end, the frog won consequent upon which there is death.

There are two types of death to the Igbo- dying well and not dying well, which Opata explains thus: "The concept of *Uwa Mgbede* is that of attaining ripe old age", while "the Igbo also have the concept of dying badly: *ajo onwu*, literally 'bad death'." (1998:178-179). Even though all manner of dying is an indication of an end for the dead, the *Igbo* have conceptions of death which may grant or deny one a befitting burial rite. The phenomenon of death preoccupies the thought of *Ndi Igbo* as evident in their songs, art, folklore, popular amusements and literature. Our playwrights are not exempted here. This work believes that Esiaba Irobi is one Igbo playwright who dwells much on the phenomenon of death. His *Nwokedi*, *Hangmen Also Die*, *The Other Side of the Mask*, and *The Fronded Circle* attest to this. Onukwugha's position about the African view applies to *Ndi Igbo* with double emphasis and pinpoints the thrust of Irobi's *The Fronded Circle* which is here used for illustrative analysis. In his view:

A person prefers a slow and lingering death not through the aid of a machine but a natural prolongation of the dying process so that he or she could make their peace, say farewell to friends and relatives, and give final instructions to immediate relatives (2011:1).

Onwu (2002:24) believes that because of this heavy accent which the traditional Igbo place on human life, they go to any length in order to preserve it. Hence the Igbo constantly resort to divination, traditional medicine, magic, the use of protective charms or amulets and initiation into secret cults in order to cope with various uncertainties of life, for protection and progress.

One of such is *Ike Isi*- a practice adopted for the extension of earthly life. In this principle, a protective charm is prepared in an earthenware pot or tied with plaiting thread and respectively buried or hung somewhere invincible to the eyes of another person. The spot where the charm is buried or hung must be hidden from other people's view, and known only to the individual involved, his *dibia* or his confidant who is usually a close associate or member of his cult. With this charm, the individual can swap the lives of his children or other younger ones around him. He can also defy death for as long as the charm remains hidden and undestroyed. This practice is the preoccupation of Esiaba Irobi in *The Fronded Circle*. It should also be noted that the word *Ike isi* is the name for this practice by the Njaba people of Imo State and the Ngwa people of Abia State. Very many Igbo communities have their various names for this practice. The Oba people of Idemmili in Anambra State refer to it as *Ikobe ndu* (Hanging of life).

Synopsis of *The Fronded Circle*

In the play, Esiaba Irobi presents the story of a man named Onwutuebe who indulged in the practice of *Ike Isi*. With this, he defies death seven times by swapping the lives of his male children. Because the Igbo society is structured in line with primogeniture, Onwutuebe's relative, Onwudinulo, plans to eliminate Onwutuebe's only surviving brother, Gilbert Afonne who it behooves to inherit Onwutuebe's possessions since he has devoured all his male children. Being Onwutuebe's confidant who knows where the protective charm is buried, he exhumes it. When death now comes for Onwutuebe, the only option left for the family is to discover and destroy the charm for Onwutuebe to die. When Ikenga the *dibia* that prepared the charm is contracted, he could not find the charm. Meanwhile, Afonne's wife Gwendolyn does not approve of any Onwutuebe's relatives coming close to her husband. A medical doctor by training, she is tricked into leaving the house with a fake accident case that requires emergency attention. In her absence, Afonne, a musicologist by training, is persuaded with a promise of teaching him how to play and interpret the talking drums. He then falls into the trap of stepping on the potent *Ese* drum' that makes him confess Onwutuebe's crimes on his behalf. This consequently leads to the death of both Onwutuebe and Afonne. When it appears as if Onwudinulo has succeeded in his evil plans, the death of Onwutuebe liberates his only daughter,

Kelechi, who has been in labour for a long time. She is delivered of a baby boy who will continue the Onwutuebe lineage. Hence, the evil plans of Onwudinulo are now disrupted. Afonne's wife Gwendolyn prepares to leave back to her country. As she pays her last respect to Afonne, she picks her pistol, aims at Onwudinulo and avenges her husband's death.

The Fronded Circle and the Phenomenon of Death in Igbo Worldview

The Fronded Circle could be seen as an affirmation of J. S Mbiti's position that:

Literature is undertaken in the general background of a people's culture to interpret the culture and emphasize some aspects of it which should be studied or promoted, or to satirize some other aspects in order to point them for correction or abandonment. Works of literature whether they uphold the culture or are critical of it, subsequently become part of the culture in so far as, in some sense, they interpret the culture (Myth and the African Universe, 27).

Hardly can a playwright avoid implicating his environment in his dramaturgy. The artist is not

restricted by any rule not to employ in his works elements alien to his society. To gain the attention of people outside his society, the artist alternates materials from his local community with alien ones. But he must have roots somewhere for according to Elechi Amadi,

...even when the readers are enthralled by the most dizzying fantasies, they still bug unconsciously for familiar havens at which to pause, ponder and re establish a sense of reality (cited in Ihentuge, 2002: 9).

In *The Fronded Circle*, the playwright dwells on an age long practice called *Ike Isi*. As earlier stated, with the practice, an individual can defy death and use the lives of his kith and kin especially the younger ones whenever death dares him. Okwu explains this to Uka at the very beginning of the play:

Okwu: A man's head. An old man's head. The man buried his head in an earthenware pot in his barn (p.1).

The choice of the barn as the right place for the burying of the charm could be understood in the light of the fact that the barn in Igbo culture is regarded as the store house for the man's most cherished wealth- yam (*Ji*). Also the charm remains potent and efficacious for as

long as it is hidden from people's knowledge. Hence the choice of the barn- a place that is usually the exclusive preserve of the man of the house and restricted to children and women. This equally explains why Onwutuebe buried the heart of the white man he killed during the Second World War in his barn (p. 70). *Okwu* goes further to educate Uka, his medicine apprentice contemporary, on the essence of *Ike Isi* saying:

Okwu: Listen, a man buries his head as a protective charm against death.

It is a powerful medicine. It lets the man swap his age life with the life of other men especially... his kith and kin...(p. 3)

With this charm, Onwutuebe was able to swap the lives of his five sons (p. 5), the last of them being Ndubuisi whose death is reported by Okwu (p. 14). Possessed, upon mounting the *Ese* drum, Gilbert confesses Onwutuebe's deeds thus:

Gilbert: I tied up my head. I hid it in a pot and buried it in my yam barn. I sacrificed my five Sons in exchange for my life...(p.72)

Onwutuebe has also used this charm to defy death on seven occasions:

Onwutuebe's Voice: ...I am
Onwutuebe...The defiant one... I
have defied death seven times. I
will defy Death seven times
more...(p. 25)

The mythological symbolism of the numbers five and seven in Igbo cosmology is worth pointing out here. Umeh (1997:35) state that "Five (5) is *Ubaja Ikenga* (the multiplicity of plurality of Ikenga) and it is at this mystic number (*ise*) that *ofò* is bestowed upon one's hand and concentrated at the little finger..." He goes further to say that the "act of forbearance or forgiveness" can be extended to one's enemy at least four times "to complete the requisite number of *ogu* one needs before visiting one's offender with a retaliation" (1997:49). (*Ogu* here can be translated to mean compassionate righteousness.) Ani/Ala (the Igbo goddess of land) must have forgiven Onwutuebe four times. The death of Ndubuisi is Onwutuebe's fifth of such crimes. Hence, he is punished. Also, Onwutuebe defied death seven times and could not defy it any longer. The logic behind this could be deduced from the mystical symbolism the Igbo assign to the number seven. Umeh (1997:35) again comes to our rescue here "seven (7) is sacred to finality of action or decision. It embraces the cosmological myths of the swallowing of the genitals of Horus (*Aro*) by *Asa* fish..." Having defied death seven times, it was the final for Onwutuebe.

The Igbo, as in other cultures have this inordinate fear of death. One will not hesitate to rebuke any wish made by another person of one's death. As Eric Fromm rightly said, to die is poignantly bitter. At the revelation of the inherent danger underlying the errand their master sent them on, Uka, is fast to state "I don't want to die. I am my mother's only son" (p.4). The stage direction here says of Uka "He is visibly shaken." When Okwu interprets Onwusoamaonye's sign language to mean that one of the coffins is Uka's measurement and is being given to him (Uka) as a New Year gift, Uka rebukes him saying:

Uka: Are you wishing me death?

Okwu: Won't you die? Will you live forever?

Uka: I don't want to die now... I am too young to...die...(p. 8)

Because of this fear, people always postpone their death and shift it to the old. Gilbert spoke of Onwutuebe saying "He is eighty. Isn't he? Why can't he just die...?" (p.21). Only the selfless old ones acknowledge the fact that the Igbo see it as good death (onwu oma) if children bury their parents and not vice versa. Ikenga, the *dibia* in *The Fronded Circle*, knows this only too well and speaks of himself "my heels are pointing towards homewards... my foot is resting on a grave" (p. 18). On sighting the painted coffin in Onwusoamaonye's shop, he could not hide his emotions:

Ikenga: (to himself) What a beautiful coffin. Gilded and painted. Oh if I had someone, a living soul... to buy this for me at my death, would I hesitate to die...even today... (p.9).

Despite man's inordinate fear of death as well as the postponement and denial tendencies usually adopted by the young about their death, inevitably, we all end up in death. At the approach of their master Ikenga, the hitherto 'afraid-of-death' Okwu and Uka had no other option but to take cover inside the coffins. They go further to acknowledge death as everyone's heritage insisting that death is "our fate." (p.11)

Earlier stated is the fact that to the Igbo, death is not an end as life is cyclical. Death is only a transition to either the world of the unborn from where one can be born again into the world of the living or to the world of the ancestors from where one can interact with, assist, protect and/ or mingle into the affairs of the living.

Man dies to regenerate. Therefore to *Ndi Igbo* if there is no death, there would be no birth and vice versa. Birth is interwoven with death just as death is interwoven with birth; hence both are related to each in a dialectic (Ezikeojiaku, 2008: 38).

This view of Ezikeojiaku is given practical dramatic representation in *The Fronded Circle*. Though a fairly long one, this line by Gilbert shows the playwright's understanding of this Igbo world view of death stated above:

Gilbert: The seed is the seedling, the seedling is the plant. The plant is the tree; the tree is its branches. Its branches are its leaves and its leaves bear the flowers, the flowers bear the fruits, the fruits ripen and fall. They fall and become seeds, the seeds grow into seedlings and seedlings into trees. This is the journey of our soul; the road from life to death and from death to life again. This is the mystery of the world-it is the rhythm of our souls... (p.69)

Death here is seen as a necessity for the continuation of the human race. Only the living feels the pain and anguish of death- the dead do not. Hear Onwudinulo: "You don't understand. Death is not a punishment. When you go over, you forget. Only the livings suffer the pain and anguish" (p.45).

Nothing in existence has meaning if its opposite does not exist. Put the other way, things have real meaning only when they are juxtaposed with their

opposites. This fact runs through *The Fronded Circle*. In the Carpenter's shed, a baby's cot painted green is juxtaposed with a finished coffin painted red. The positioning of these symbolic items is worth noting. The stage direction on page 1 of the play is a bit confusing. It states that both the cot and the coffin are on the right hand side of the Carpenter. A careful following of the events in the play reveals that the cot is on the left side and the coffin on the right hand side of the carpenter. Here, the setting of the sun is juxtaposed with the rising one as the baby cot represents Kelechi's child (life) on the way into the world while the coffin represents Onwutuebe on his way to the land of the dead (p.12). That death is as necessary as life is further made clear by the fact that unless Onwutuebe dies, kelechi cannot give birth (p.21). The very moment Onwutuebe dies, the playwright notes "suddenly a baby's cry pierces the tragic air" (p.27).

To the Igbo, two days matter most to a man- the day of one's birth and the day of one's death. Naturally, one does not know what happens on any of these days. This is metaphorically represented in the play with the fact that Dr. Gilbert Onwutuebe died exactly on his birthday. He was already marking his birthday with his wife before the wife was tricked into leaving and Gilbert taken away to step on the *Ese* drum.

Again the characterization is spiced up with metaphorical images; their names assign to the character their functions in the world of the play. The allegorical

characters like Onwutuebe, Onwudinulo, Diegwu, Afonne, Ikenga, Okwu and Uka go further to display the characteristics for which they are named. For instance Onwutuebe (death wait) indulges in 'Ike isi' to defy and delay death; Onwudinulo (death is at home) schemes on how to kill his brother Onwutuebe so as to inherit his possessions. Also Afonne (the same womb) is tricked into dying for his brother; Diegwu (wonders) plays the *Ese* drum and the occultic ritual from which Afonne dies; Ikenga (god of justice) serves as the *dibia*, while Okwu and Uka can be described as trouble and confusion. They perpetrate trouble and confusion in the world of the play, yet loaded with comical interjections.

Esiaba Irobi also used *The Fronded Circle* to portray the confusion that sets in when one is faced with certain situations especially the issue of death. Nwannediya is torn between traditional means (as exemplified by Ikenga on one hand and Onwudinulo, Diegwu and their followers on the other hand) and the Christian faith. She is also torn between seeking medical attention for Kelechi's case and seeking spiritual attention (the Christian way) because of Kelechi's faith.

Conclusion

Esiaba Irobi has used the phenomenon of death to produce a play text that advices on certain aspects of our contemporary life. First, it should be pointed out that the play advices on the stance of the modern generation on traditional issues. Because of learning and socialization, Afonne sees his culture and tradition as

“primitive rituals” (p.52) and “superstitions...here-brained superstition...” (p.22). Ironically, he ends up in a traditionally mystic manner.

The *Ike Isi* could be said to be diabolic. The practice could be perceived as beneficial to the individual who indulges in it and to the cult he belongs to. Yet, when weighed from the point of view of the ethical principle of Utilitarianism, it is, to say the least, diabolic. Those who indulge in it substitute the lives of many for their sole life- a contradiction of the popular Igbo saying that “oka nma otu onye inwuru oha karia oha inwuru otu onye” (it is better for one man to die for many the people, than the people dying for one man). Also the pain and anguish suffered by the individual and all those around him shows the evil of the practice. The person most times live to the point of existing in a pitiful and an adverse circumstance- what the Igbo refer to as “*Odi ndu onwu ka mma*; meaning one who is alive but would have been better off dead” (Opata, 1998:185). Ikenga describes such death as a shameful death “I have seen the breathing corpse. His legs are swollen, soon the tissue will burst and pus issue forth. Soon maggots will begin to feed on his flesh while he is still breathing” (p.26). This type of death is regarded as an evil/bad death (*Onwu ojo/Ajo onwu*) by the Igbo.

It was Onwutuebe’s desire to live longer than approved of him by God that makes him indulge in the practice of *Ike Isi*, swapping the lives of all his sons. This in turn is what gives Onwudinulo the temptation of

plotting to eliminate Onwutuebe's only surviving brother Gilbert in order to inherit the possessions of the Onwutuebes (p.27). Of course, he loses his own life in the process.

Ike Isi seems to be dwindling. It is an obnoxious and out dated practice. One may wonder the sense in adopting it as a material for creative writing in this modern time or even the contribution of a work as this, and the relevance of analyzing a work from an old and fading tradition. Apart from documenting this dying tradition for generations yet to come, *The Fronded Circle* is a metaphor for modern day politics in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular. The '*Ike Isi*' syndrome is here seen at such situations where people occupying certain sensitive positions fail to recognize when they have lost popularity among the people they lead/govern or rather refuse to relinquish power when the masses are no longer at home with their unpopularity. The '*Ike Isi*' syndrome has characterized the lives of several countries in Africa. The cases of Idi Amin of Uganda, Mobutu Seseko of Zaire, Mubarak of Egypt and more recently Gaddafi of Libya are but a few living examples of '*Ike Isi*' syndrome in Africa. The Biyas, the Mugabes and their likes are still living examples. In Nigeria, the recycling of the same old faces in our politics is also a pointer to '*Ike isi*' syndrome. Alex Asigbo's *The Reign of Paschal Amusu*, Ojo Rasaki's *Once Upon a Tower, This Land Must Sacrifice* and Rogbodiyan, Fred Agbeyegbe's *The King Must Dance Naked*, Esiaba

Irobi's *Nwokedi*, and several others contain instances of *Ike Isi* syndrome.

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