



Symbolism in J.P. Clark's *The Ozidi Saga*

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In his definition which has in some respects become increasingly standard, M. H. Abrams describes the epic as;

“... a long narrative poem on a great and serious subject, related in an elevated style, and centered on heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose action depends the fate of a tribe, a nation or the human race” (49).

Chinyere Nwahunanya further captures the essence of the form when he notes that

“The epic is an art form with a clear humanistic relevance, not just in terms of the lesson it teaches its audience, but also for the challenges it poses to the creative consciousness and ingenuity of its performers” (187).

In the context of the unmitigated preponderance of war, violence and blood in its content, some critics have tended to question the relevance of the epic in the modern world of law and order. Such doubt is perhaps influenced by Victor Hugo's classification of poetry into historical epochs when he states that

“...poetry has three periods, each of which corresponds to an epoch of civilization: the code, the epic, and the drama. Primitive times are lyrical, ancient times apical, modern times dramatic” (cited in Finnegan, 247).

From his classification, the epic is historically consigned to the ancient civilization which is believed to have been overtaken by drama in modern

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times. In other words, the sensibilities which gave life to the epic as an art form no longer subsist.

It would appear, however, that such a conclusion would be difficult to sustain in the face of abundant evidence to the contrary. The enduring relevance of the epic seems to arise partly from the premium which it places on the sense of honor, an attribute which has remained highly desirable, and immensely valuable in the modern-day society. Man's craving for honor, in ancient Greece and other climes, informs heroic deeds from which conception, modern man derives his sense of honor and heroism. C. M. Bowra elucidates this point when he states that heroic poetry is inspired by a sense of honor, noting that "the admiration for great doings lies deep in the human heart and comforts and cheers, even when it does not stir to emulation" (4).

Apart from the attendant sense of honor, the sustained value of the narrative partly lies in the fact that the epic hero is the quintessence of man's attempt to overcome his frailty in his effort to attain a comprehensive manhood which refuses to admit that anything is impossible to accomplish. As Bowra adds, epic poetry "cannot exist unless men believe that human beings are in themselves sufficient objects of interest and that their chief claim is the pursuit of honor through risk". (5)

In the final analysis and in spite of the interface of magic and the supernatural in the heroic expeditions of the protagonist, the epic may well be regarded as the symbol of man's restless psyche and his relentless striving to master his environment in the face of his entrapment in the web of the numerous unknown and unseen powers. Properly considered, it may well be that the restless and adventurous spirit of the epic hero is the historical foundation upon which modern scientific spirit of inquiry rests, finding expression in space travels and other seemingly supernatural feats of the modern man.

While the debate on the continued relevance of the epic rages, Denys Thompson appears to have offered a plausible explanation on the nature of the epic narrative when he notes that "the propensity of violence in the epic may be regarded as a dramatization of the senselessness of the horrors of this world of violence, the endless sequence of murder and revenge" (5). From the foregoing, it would appear that the preponderance of violence and the efforts of the epic hero to properly arm himself to contain the onslaught of his adversaries may also be regarded as a sustained commentary on the arms race and a parable of a world at war. Incidentally, the recurrence of violence and blood-letting in various parts of the world today, coupled with the

amassment of weapons of mass destruction, are pointedly reminiscent of the circumstances dramatized in the literary epic.

In *The Ozidi Saga*, J.P. Clark employs the vehicles of history, culture and myth to explore these robust concerns of man in the universe. Told in seven nights to dance, music, mime and ritual, *The Ozidi Saga* is both the title and the story of the protagonist. The plot runs into six phases or acts which in turn run into some eighty scenes or situations with Ozidi's quest for justice as the binding thematic thread. The driving force for Ozidi's campaign is a sense of duty moored on the desire to secure ultimate rest in the world beyond for the spirit of his murdered father. The quest derives its meaning from the Ijo world view which holds that in death, a man who lives a good life and dies of natural causes at a mature age, transits to the world of the dead where he becomes an ancestor, acting as patron and arbiter over the affairs of the living. If a man lives and dies dishonorably or of unnatural causes, however, he is left adrift in the evil grove, where his spirit wanders restlessly until such a time when he may be called home into the kingdom of the dead after due purification and propitiatory rites by his descendants. Such is the fate of Ozidi's father who is despicably murdered by his treacherous people.

In introducing the Saga, Clark captures the mediatory linkage and networking between the living and the dead when he points out that:

The Character range appearing in the saga of Ozidi reveals something of the world-view of the Ijo. There hardly exists a sharp line between the world of the living and the dead. Man in the system is a link in the one continuum that is life, a medial link in a chain embracing the dead, the living and the unborn (xxiii).

The dictates of honor and a sense of responsibility cumulatively demand that the descendant of the dead warrior must avenge his shameful and unnatural death so that he (the deceased) could find proper rest among the ancestors. This is the arduous task which Ozidi faces in the Saga and which he must accomplish by ensuring that every single actor in his father's assassination and disgrace is duly punished. To accomplish the task, Ozidi must cultivate the virtues of steadfastness and obedience to a special diet, rigorous exercises, and a lifestyle which permits neither alcohol nor sex. in the Saga which ultimately determines the course of Public affairs in the Ijo society, Ozidi fights about twenty grueling battles, confronting the warriors of the community who killed his father, dispatching each of them and cutting off their heads. In the course of his vengeful mission, the protagonist is aided by a variety of personages, the flora and fauna of his communal habitat as well

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as other supernatural elements. His chief prop and counselor is his grandmother, Oreame, who combines her enormous supernatural powers with great cunning to ensure the stupendous success of her grandson.

Symbolism as a stylistic device forms a major pillar on which Clark tethers meaning in the Saga. It is a device which he lavishly employs to underline the cosmological essence. As a literary and stylistic device, symbolism involves the creative recourse to parallels drawn from nature and to representative imagery in order to capture and foreground perceived similarities. It is essential to point out that the copious and sustained undercurrents of symbolism in the saga of Ozidi is accountable for the philosophical and artistic profundity of the narrative for, as Isidore Okpewho points out, "... symbols are wisely employed in various forms of African oral literature for probing deep philosophical, moral, and spiritual matters. They are a mark of high sophistication in oral literature" (104). This contention is even truer of *The Ozidi Saga*. An examination of the use of symbolism as a major stylistic device in the Saga shows that Clark makes numerical symbolism quite preponderant. For instance, the numeral "seven" ("7") emerges as the most recurrent symbol of utmost profundity which pervades all the scenes and incidents from the beginning to the end of the narrative.

While the debate about the religious, mystical and mythological significance of the number "seven" remains on-going, there is little doubt that it is important to note that the entire work of creation by God was completed in six days with the divine charge to keep the Sabbath (seventh day) holy. The seventh day has consequently been adopted by Christendom as a day of rest and reverence of the Almighty God in appreciation of his executive act of creation. Again, the number "seven" is generally regarded as a victorious symbol from the biblical point of view. In the book of Joshua, chapter six of the Christian Bible, a detailed description is offered about God's charge to the people of Israel on the strategy for pulling down the city:

Then the Lord said to Joshua, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and fighting men. March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. When you hear them sound along blast on the trumpets, have all the people give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the people will go up, every man straight in" (v.2-5).

We are further told that Joshua followed this formula and the city of Jericho was conquered, thus emphasizing the importance of "seven" as a victorious

and liberational symbol. Furthermore, seven is also regarded as the symbol of the pillars of the Galaxy, from the mystical point of view. In this regard, it is believed that 7 Galaxies exist. The recent visits to space by scientists and the confirmation that life exists beyond the earth have frequently been cited as a vindication of the inscrutable mystical significance of "seven".

In many Christian denominations, the number continues to occupy a special symbolic status. For instance, in the Roman Catholic Church, all the sacraments that are available to man are normally seven in number emphasizing that all the activities of man from birth to death fall within those seven sacraments. In his work As you like it, William Shakespeare artistically employs the figure "seven" in his literary metaphor on the phases of man's life. Speaking through the character Jacques, the playwright adds that:

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players:
they have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time
plays many parts His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms... Last scene of all,
that ends this strange eventful history is second childishness and
mere oblivion Sans teeth, Sans eyes, Sans taste, Sans everything.
(Act Two: Scene vii, 138-165).

It is evident that Shakespeare couples mythology with practical experience to foreground the symbolic significance of "seven" which he uses as a metaphor for the transitional stages of man from birth to death. the point here is to underline the universal significance of the number "seven" 7. In The Ozidi Saga , the symbolic importance of the figure "Seven" is dramatized. As the narrative begins, we are told that the city of Orua is made up of seven districts or wards and that the kingship stool is rotated among these (1). With the ascension of Temugedege on the throne, Ozidi waits seven days before he sets out to complain about the double standards demonstrated by the people: "so it went on for seven days. When it came to the seventh day, yes, by my word, Ozidi's bowels tuned bad" (4). It is noteworthy that the people of Orua conspire to kill Ozidi on account of his tirade of invectives against them, which killing, triggers off the vengeful quest of the son for justice for his father. At the birth of junior Ozidi, again, the figure "seven" assumes a symbolic significance in ushering him into the world:

by the ninth month, when she [Ozidi's wife] fell to labor, ..., a
great storm appeared. So it raged, and as it became a seven-day
storm, the woman delivered and... it was a boy (13).

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It is important to note that the birth of the junior Ozidi is attended by a serious climatic episode - the seven-day storm. Again, we notice that as soon as the child is born, his grandmother, "Oreama snatched up the boy and threw him into a cauldron.. steeped in there, the child remained under for seven nights, before she fetched him away." (13). The profound symbolic significance of the figure - "seven" cannot be ignored as it is crucial in preparing the infant for his valorous and vengeful expedition ahead.

Also, we notice that as Oreama takes the boy into the forest to consult Boukarakarabiri, the great medicine man begins his mysterious ritual by "snatching his magic fan, and lashing out once" twice! Now lashing out here, now lashing out there and then having lashed at seven spots, seven pots sprang out of the ground" (27). Subsequently, we are informed that having prepared the medicine into seven pots, Boukarakarabiri later stitches up the medicine "into seven slots" which are tossed into Ozidi's mouth. After Ozidi has swallowed the medicine Boukarakarabiri guarantees his invincibility, assuring that: "no medicine by another, no sword by another, could kill him" (33). With his successful inoculation against death by medicine or sword, the stage is now set for Ozidi to acquire the instrument of operation. To achieve this, a special sword-smith is invited. Symbolically, the sword is not an ordinary one, for after two initial attempts, the sword-smith makes Ozidi a special sword *of* seven prongs with which he will fight his battles. It is essential to point out that right from his birth Ozidi's life is dictated by a series of "seven-bound" events.

It is also significant to note that in the course of his battles with different personages and monsters, seven remains crucial in determining the course of the more awesome battles. For instance, during Ozidi's battle with Ofe, the war raged for so long without resolution until Oreama, decided that the battle should be put-off "for seven days before taking it up again" (195). Importantly, within the seven-day interlude, Oreama intensifies her consultations with various oracles in the search for the solution to *Ofe* as the battle resumes.

Furthermore, we notice that in the fifth night of the narrative, just before his encounter with the Scrotum King, Ozidi and his team, in the course of their walk through the bush, arrive a certain compound which has seven courtyards. Ozidi knocks down all the doors before he reaches where the King is resting. Incidentally, in spite of Ozidi's thirst for blood, Oreama prevails on him to leave the man alone (209). It would appear that hiding behind seven doors, this particular King possesses kindred spirit with Ozidi whose own life is dictated by "sevens" and that Oreama's appreciation of this

significant fact accounts for her insistence that the man be left in peace. One could speculate that if Ozidi had killed the peaceful and conciliatory King behind the seven doors, he might have met his Waterloo in his subsequent battles. This may not be quite plausible because shortly after defeating the Scrotum King, the next combatant is Tebesonoma - a monstrous man with *seven* heads and *seven* crowns (36 - 7) who is again vanquished by Ozidi.

Similarly, in night seven of the narrative, we are faced with an interesting scenario in Ozidi's dramatic encounter with the fearful Tebekawene who vows to kill Ozidi and his band, cook and eat them up. Symbolically, even before his battle with Ozidi, Tebekawene directs his wife to put seven pots on fire, preparatory to cooking Ozidi and his company, whom he hopes to use for his means during the next seven days (320). However, in spite of Tebekawene's awesome powers and devastating track-record, Ozidi still defeats Tebekawene. It would appear that the seven pots on the fire are responsible for vitiating the powers of Tebekawene because unknown to him, Ozidi has immunity for seven pots having been steeped in a cauldron for seven days at birth and having swallowed seven medicine pots as prepared for him by Boukarakarabiri during his formative stage. It would appear that any danger in seven pots presents no threat for Ozidi having already acquired the "patent" for seven pots.

During the next battle with Azema and Azemaroti, the significance of seven pots is again further dramatized. We notice that, in herself assured confidence, Azema orders her son Azemaroti to put seven pots on the fire and add some quantities of plantain in the pots preparatory to the killing and subsequent cooking of Ozidi and his band for food. In addition to putting the pots on fire, Azema and Azemaroti sent messages to the neighborhood informing them of the feast on hand. Oreame's battle with Azema turns out to be so grueling that in order to subdue her, Oreame spikes Azema's head with needles into seven folds (358). When, eventually, the duo of Azema and Azemaroti are killed by Ozidi, we are told that the seven pots are left to burn to ashes (362). Again, as in the previous encounter, Ozidi defeats the team that flaunts seven pots.

Symbolically, Ozidi's battles with the duo with the seven pots mark his last battles among the treacherous murderers of his father prior to his final debacle with Engradon - the Smallpox king. As has been pointed out earlier, the preponderant recurrence of the symbolic figure "seven" represents not only the narrator's artistic use of symbolism but also an expression of the symbolic and mytho-cultural significance of the figure within the Ijo world view. For instance, we note that factuality of the cultural information that Tebesonoma's sister Egberigbele had just given birth and by Ijo cultural

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standards, she is expected to remain in confinement for seven days (249). In the Saga of Ozidi therefore, "seven" represents not only a symbolic stylistic device but also a loaded numerical figure which embodies the people's history, culture and world view, a symbol that emerges strategic the realization of the thematic underpinnings in the Saga, again, symbolically told in seven nights! Its pervasiveness in the saga leaves little doubt about its commanding status among all the other symbolic elements in the narrative.

The sword is another major symbolism that pervades the entire narrative. It emerges not only as an instrument of war but also as a dramatization of the psychology of vengeance and justice. To this end, we notice that the precursor to the vengeful bloodletting that characterizes the entire Saga arises from the fact that Ozidi's father was put to the sword by his envious comrades-in-arm. Significantly and symbolically, at the point of molding Ozidi's sword prior to the commencement of his bloody mission, we notice that after the first attempt, as Ozidi swings the sword, it breaks up and mysteriously travels to Ofe's compound (one of his father's murderers) and kills his son (44). On the second attempt, the sword breaks again and this time, kills the son of Azezabife, another of his father's murderers (46). It is essential to point out that by the impersonal and mysterious killing of the sons of his father's enemies; the sword emerges as the arrow of God and a symbol of Justice. By so doing, the sword also becomes a message bearer of Ozidi's declaration of war against the murderers of his father. It is equally noteworthy that when the sword is eventually made, it emerges as no ordinary sword but a special sword of seven prongs (47).

The symbolic significance of the sword of seven prongs is that in the same way as the seven districts of Orua conspired to murder Ozidi's father, so would his vengeance be directed against the seven conspiratorial districts. Again, the sword emerges as an agent and loaded symbol of justice. It is worthy of note that the strategic importance of the sword is lent credence to by the fact that the sword remained invaluable throughout Ozidi's bloody expedition. Without the sword, therefore, it is doubtful that Ozidi would have won his numerous battles. Indeed, we find that in the few occasions when Ozidi's enemies appear to gain initial upper hands over him are when he has not been roused to action and when his sword has not thrust forth from his stomach - Ozidi's seat of rage and valour. However, as soon as he is roused to action and his sword sticks out, his opponent is as good as defeated.

Related to the symbolism of Ozidi's sword is the issue of the justness of his vengeful campaign. In this regard, we notice that before Ozidi finally finishes an opponent in the course of any battle, his effort is accompanied by a recurrent theme song "sacrifice, sacrifice", "Agbodidi is sacrifice" (69), for

instance, or "Akpobrisi is sacrifice" (141), "Badoba is sacrifice" (153), "Ebeye is sacrifice" (169), "Fingrifin is sacrifice" (186) etc. The symbolic implication of this theme song which accompanies the final defeat of every challenger is that Ozidi's mission is an act of sacrifice to propitiate the land for the criminal murder of his father. The fact of his victims being regarded as sacrificial objects elevates his mission, imbues it with nobility and justice as it indicates that the protagonist is not merely a blood-thirsty vampire but an agent on a mission to purify the land which had been polluted by the innocent blood of the murdered Ozidi. In effect, Ozidi's killing of the murderers of his father transcends homicide and becomes official communal executions- to propitiate the spirit of the ancestors who had been offended by the cold blooded murder of the late Ozidi. Because his cause is just, we perhaps find explanation as to why the gods and other supernatural forces align with him to decimate his opponents in the pursuit of his cause.

Perhaps, there is detectable a tangential linkage between the victories of Ozidi and the Ijo (and indeed African) world view which holds that the gods fight the cause of the just. It is in this regard, therefore, that we gain a clearer understanding as to why Ozidi does not take his enemies by surprise. Indeed, at the commencement of his vengeful mission, Ozidi sends a message of war to Ofe, Azezabife and the entire community. It is also worthy of note that during Ozidi's battle with Azeza, he agrees to postpone the fight until another day at the instance of Azeza who pleads that he is militarily disadvantaged on that particular occasion. (80) This does not only buttress Ozidi's confidence in the justness of his cause, but also demonstrates his nobility by his observance of institutionalized code of conduct for warfare. Such observances and postponements are repeated throughout the narrative.

Interestingly, the circumstances surrounding the birth of Ozidi are themselves highly symbolic. We notice that Ozidi's mother, Orua was a barren woman up until the death of her husband. The fact that she conceived at all and later gave birth to the junior Ozidi never ceased to mystify the community. At a very momentous occasion when the war commander, Ofe, is overwhelmed by a combination of fear and outrage over the exploits of the vengeful Ozidi, he gives expression to the puzzle which the birth of Ozidi represents to the community. Musing about Orea, he said:

That woman is the kind that cannot bear. A wife who from her time of coming has never been pregnant. The woman has no womb to her. We all said so then. So we said, but looking again, it is Ozidi's own son that has come and killed every person close behind me till only one now is left (145).

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When we situate this information in the context of the earlier one that after the burial of Ozidi, his wife became pregnant by receiving "her dead husband into the woman..." (12) we are left in no further doubt that Ozidi's conception and birth are remarkably unnatural. To drive this point home that Ozidi is no ordinary child, we are further informed that close to his delivery date, the community witnessed "a seven day storm [and] the woman delivered" (13).

From the foregoing, the mysterious circumstances surrounding the conception and birth of Ozidi are symbolically indicative of his salvatory personage and in keeping with the general expectation for the emergence of an epic hero. The fact that Ozidi was conceived not through a coital union between his mother and father (or any other man) but through a supernatural agency is poignantly reminiscent of Jesus Christ another salvatory figure whose mother conceived not through biological coitus with her husband, but through the Holy Spirit. Again, we notice another symbolic parallel, between Christ and Ozidi because Christ's birth was heralded by the elements (the stars) while Ozidi's birth was preceded by a seven-day storm. In effect therefore, it would appear that in the same way the Christ came to save humanity by cleansing the world with his blood, so does Ozidi set out to seek justice by purifying the land with blood of pollutant murderers whom he put to the sword. Again, we are confronted with an unmistakable and coterminous relationship between Ozidi and Christ when we recall the fact that Christ cautioned Peter against criminal violence with his sword warning him that he who lives by the sword, dies by the sword in the same way that Ozidi dispatched all criminals who murdered his father with their sword by putting them to death with his sword. As a truism both for Christ and for Ozidi, those that took the sword in the city of Ora, eventually died by the sword.

In the Saga of Ozidi, the head also emerges as another mystical symbol which is liberally employed by the narrator to understand the philosophical depth of the message of the Saga. In this regard, we notice that the head is dramatized ceaselessly throughout the narrative. Indeed, we note that at the beginning of the Saga, as Ozidi is murdered by his colleagues, they run into trouble with his head because, try as they can, they are unable to decapitate him. It is only when *Ozidi's* wife reveals the secret for cutting Ozidi's head that the generals are able to do so (8). Subsequently, we discover that *Ofe* and *Azeza* are the principal enemies of Ozidi because it was these two men that carried his father's head and turned it into a play thing. Besides, we must appreciate that the critical issue that engendered the lengthy bloody spiral that characterized the Saga, arose *from* Ozidi's feeling of injustice that the

new king, his brother Temugedge was not honored with a human head as is the tradition with the city of *Orea* after the coronation of a new king. Because of Ozidi's invectives on the community-over their denial of a human to his brother, the people conspire to kill him, which act sows the seed of vengeance in his son, accounting *for* the monstrous human butchery that attends his quest *for* justice.

Significantly, it is essential to note that as a matter of duty and procedure, Ozidi methodically cuts off the heads of all the people he defeats in battle. Accompanied by his theme song "sacrifice", Ozidi ensures the severance of the heads of his victims which he carries home and deposits in his shrine. In a few exceptional cases when Ozidi's opponent appeared to be unduly strong, it always turned out that their power lay in their heads. In such cases, Oreame would juggle her magical arsenal and neutralize the opponents by perching on their heads. The formula works in the cases of Tebesonoma of the seven heads, Ogueren the tough one, Agodi and Azema. The symbolic value of the head lies not only in the fact that it personifies the individual, it is also the seat of wisdom and discretion. It is for this reason that traditionally, warriors display human heads as the symbols of trophies they won. To kill a man, decapitate him and carry his head home is therefore a supreme symbol of valor. For Ozidi, the protagonist of the Saga, his act of cutting off the heads of his victims embodies an unequivocal message of strength and superiority emphasizing the fact that his father's head which his enemies cut is now fully avenged with their (the enemies') own heads. The message, indeed, is clear.

If a literary work may be viewed, at least in part, as syndicated reflection of the existential circumstances of the society that engenders it, *The Ozidi Saga* stands tall not only as an emblematic commentary on man and his universe but also as a repository and embodiment of a people's cultural history and values. In view of the artistic depth immanent in *The Ozidi Saga*, it would appear that the epic is a tailor-made vindication of Denys Thompson's assertion on the nature of an ageless epic when he states that "an oral epic of lasting values is close to the society which produced it, and interprets to us the code and attitudes and feelings of that society"(54). Perhaps, the uniqueness of *The Ozidi Saga* lies not only in its successful inquiry into, and interpretation of, the lore of the people that produced it but also in its elevated use of symbolism as a preponderant stylistic device to accomplish the lofty goals of the Ijo epic.

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