

TOTEMIC ONTOLOGY IN CHUKUWEMEKA IKE'S *THE BOTTLED LEOPARD* AND CHIKODİLİ EMELUMADU'S *DAZZLING*

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Abstract

This paper is a comparative study of Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Bottled Leopard* and ChikodİLİ Emelumadu's *Dazzling*. The thrust of the paper is found in the study of the protagonist's transformation from adolescents into their roles as leopard personalities. The crucial aspects identified of their development include: the unity of life in the Igbo worldview and their understanding of the cosmological realities depicted in the novels. The theory adopted for the study is magical realism. The findings reveal that the transition into their inherited roles is made easier with the knowledge of Igbo traditions, mythology and initiation rites. Second is that Emelumadu's story shows evidence of individualism and syncretism in the depiction of cosmological realities.

Key words: totem, ontology, world view, magical realism, cosmology

Introduction

The most frequent features by which it is identified include: the existence of two realities, one is a real recognizable world, while the other is magical or supernatural; a narrator who is childlike in expressing the events that happen in the story; also called the ingenuous narrator; another feature is the resolved or unresolved antinomy: this focuses on the magical events happening as being accepted as naturally expected events or strange occurrences; authorial reticence refers to the withholding of information or explanation by the author as to why magical events occur; and liminality refers to the points at which the transitions occur from the real to the magical. Bortolussi, states that "the fantastic resolves antinomy while the magical realism sustains it. Magical realism can include or exclude rational

explanation” (289). Literature presents several stories from different times and civilizations which express the belief in the existence of the magical. Chukwuemeka Ike and Chikodili Emelumadu are two Nigerian writers belonging to different generations. Both writers bear the similarities in the area of themes and setting. By far, the most striking resemblance is the magical mode in which they use to express themselves and their reliance on a shared cosmological world view of man’s existence as a physical as well as a metaphysical being. The young protagonists in both novels are torn between living their ordinary lives and accepting their responsibilities as leopard custodians in their lineage. Behind these stories are the myths, beliefs and customs of the Igbo people woven intricately and expressed through action, dialogue and point of view. Emelumadu’s narrative displays in detail, how a family can gradually disintegrate under the burden of guilt and denial. As young adults, both novels lend themselves to the genre of bildungsroman. Ike’s *The Bottled Leopard* (1985) and Emelumadu’s *Dazzling* (2023) are 38 years apart. As expected, there are differences in setting, language, style and characterization but Emelumadu bridges some of them through flashback, providing a solid base for the background of the novel. Ike’s story discloses the timelessness of the traditional beliefs depicted in *The Bottled Leopard*. This study examines the depiction of the existence of the totemic leopard, giving attention to the unity of life in Igbo world view and cosmological representation. There have been several propositions about the definition of magical realism in literature. The viability of this study is based upon the mode of magical realism. According to Hegerfeldt:

Critical accounts of magical realism in postcolonial literature tend to reduce the sources of the mode draws on to so called native tradition on the one hand and western tradition on the other. Pierre Durix has examined how the cultures of colonizer and colonized join to yield the ‘hybrid aesthetics’ of magical realism... however, even prior to western colonization, non-western cultures had been subject to cross-cultural contact that led to hybridization, so that the notion of pure or authentic native tradition is essentially an ideological representation (70).

According to (Nathaniel and Akung 2022:4), the constituent of aesthetic values is culture depended.

These novels embrace the Igbo cosmological world view in which they are rooted. There is no culture that does not identify with some form of mystical or supernatural existence, this in turn reflects in their material culture, artifacts and literature. In *The Bottled Leopard* and *Dazzling*, the protagonists are teenagers who have been chosen to inherit special magical powers. But this “appointment” comes with the uncertainty of sudden death. The concept of dying, is engaged with on different levels by these writers. It can be a literal death, as well as a metaphorical one. As for resolved or unresolved antinomy, it is a process for the protagonists in both novels. Amobi is well guided. Ozeomena on the other hand, is drawn between opposite directions until she finds the courage to give-in to the innate nudging that she feels for her unanimity with the leopard.

Why the Leopard?

According to Anozie Awambu, the clothing fabric which is iconic in representing the Igbo people is wrong. This popular fabric is imprinted with the picture of a fierce looking lion and its mane. According to him, since the 1950s and 60s the Igbos have embraced a totem on the fabric called *isiagu* “but this is an imported foreign popular culture. Neither the lion nor the lion icon has any significance in Igbo cultural foundations. Indeed, using the descriptor *isiagu* to refer to a lion’s head motif is wrong use of the word *agu* (1). He explains that the leopard is the correct Igbo animal totem for various reasons. The first is semantic, derived from the word *agu* which is not a lion but a leopard because the word was created from the metaphorical use of existing words. Ancient Igbos likely did not have much contact with lions as they did with leopards because leopards inhabit rainforests unlike lions who inhabit the savannah, even though lions are adaptable. The Igbo’s endearment to the leopard is hinged to its social behaviour, agility, speed, ability to hunt in land and water, great eye sight, silence and strength. For this reason, the Igbo language “is littered with similes, metaphors, adages and proverbs that use *agu* to illustrate positive energy and abilities (3).” Awambu also claims that “first generation Igbo intellectuals had no misunderstanding that *agu* refers to leopards. Some examples include Onuora Nzekwu’s *Eze goes to School*, Anezi Okoro’s *The Village School*, Cyprian Ekwensi’s *The Leopard Claw*, Chinua Achebe’s

short story titled *How the Leopard got its Claws*, Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Bottled Leopard*, Elechi Amadi's *The Great Ponds* and others. Chimezie agrees with Awambu, he believes that totems were introduced into modern fabrics sometime during the colonial era. He laments that *isiagu* has become very popular recently: "the younger generation of Igbo people and other young Africans, by extension, have the wrong notions of the linguistic and pictorial representations of many traditionally African animals (6)". There is a growing skepticism about totems as "superstitious" and "irrational". Like Ejikemeuwa whose critique evaluates totemism as valuable for ecology and tourism. Nevertheless, his insight about totemic beliefs in Africa is valuable:

For sure, belief in totems is an existential fact among African people. Certain trees, animals, places and individuals are regarded as totems. They are seen as sacred objects that symbolize something real for the people that entertain such beliefs. Totems are also believed to possess some spiritual and supernatural powers...one thing to note from the various views of scholars is that totemism is an expression of a relationship that exists between particular human beings and their natural environment (2).

Ejikemeuwa mentions examples of totemic animals in Igboland such as pythons, monkeys, rams, tortoise, crocodiles, and tigers (tigers are very questionable). No mention of the leopard. Ejikemeuwa failed to recognize the value that the belief in totemic animals provides in the area of creative writing, film and proverbs. The Hollywood blockbuster film titled *Black Panther* featured a big cat as its totem. This film, incorporates scientific, mystical and natural existence of Africans in a world unsoiled by western civilization. Adeoye, Taiwo and Eben have done a sociolinguistic analysis of animal totems in Yoruba proverbs where they explain that:

In Yoruba culture, some proverbs are couched with symbolic animal totems to put across messages to human beings. The animal-related proverbs are drawn largely from the characteristics of the animals that have educative information about human existence. The theme of the proverbs ranges from human character and shortcomings,

the value of children, social norms, good manners, admonition, advice and caution (3).

Therefore, apart from the material value of ecological preservation and tourism; there is also a cultural value that the knowledge of totemic animals can provide for people who value their presence.

Discussion

According to Ezedike, an important aspect of life for the Igbo people is the “unity of life as the centre of cohesion and solidarity. By this we mean a relationship of being and life between each individual and his descendants, his family, his brothers and sisters in the village, his antecedents and also with God, the ultimate source of life (134).” This description is fully in display in Chukwuemeka Ike’s *The Bottled Leopard*. The village setting provides not only a physical space but a cultural centre where the parents and the community provide physical, cultural and social security for young members. In *The Bottled Leopard* there are two kinds of initiation ceremonies. The first is the outlandish display of power by the form two boys, who force the form one boys to make silly utterances with their names and places of origin. The second one is Amobi’s recollections about being initiated into the traditional spirit cult. The parents are required to present a fifteen-gallon pot of palm wine, and a customary gift of two water yams. After the initiation ceremony, Amobi gains the privilege to no longer scuttle away with women and children when the spirits assemble. According to the omniscient narrator: “he could even invoke his own ancestral spirit to emerge from the bowels of the earth through an anthill as his own spirit and sent it back therein at his pleasure. He now understood the spirit language. Most importantly, he knew the severe penalties for divulging any of the secrets (31)”. After this initiation, the privileges described include the opportunity to mingle with the innumerable ancestral spirits for a full market cycle at the Ikeji festival. This is the first step for Amobi towards becoming a full member of the Ndikelionwu community. In *The Bottled Leopard* Dibia Ofia describes his experiences before he accepted his predestined role as the inheritor of his father’s office. He had several experiences which prevent him from starting up a business and working for a private company. His family then consulted a dibia who reveals that: “The family *akpa agwu* had been abandoned since the death of

my father. Mazi, you know he was the most powerful dibia of his time in this town, in fact throughout Ndienu clan. Agwu Ngene wanted me to abandon everything else I was doing to carry the family's *akpa agwu* and become a dibia like my father" (129). In this novel we understand that the concept in unity of life is significant not only for the individual but the community at large. The office of a dibia serves as the mediator between the people and their deities. Therefore, the important role of consulting the gods for explanation or intervention concerning life's enigmatic problems is crucial for the people's wellbeing. The dibia's job is larger than himself as an individual. The initiation ceremonies which are common among the Igbo is explained in Oranekwu's book. The types of initiations enumerated include birth initiation rites, Igbo naming ritual and ceremony, puberty initiation rites, marriage initiation rites and so on. The specific kind which is described in *The Bottled Leopard* is reminiscent of the masquerade society described by Oranekwu as:

A closed association with many mysterious beliefs and practices and the membership is restricted only to males with initiation as the only absolute condition. This initiation rite takes the form of passing through terrifying and excruciating ordeals of numerous and various types, meant to toughen and harden the young man, and to instill in him, a sense of manliness, courage and endurance (108).

Oranekwu reiterates the idea that the traditional Igbo initiation rites arise from their belief in the ancestors who through the *Omenala* or *Omenani* – traditional customs dictate the rites to be performed. Through these rites, the traditional statues are further transmitted and perpetuated thereby maintaining the standard set by the ancestors. In Ike's *The Bottled Leopard*, a detailed description of the initiation process is not given but the capabilities of the initiate are described. This could be because of the oath of secrecy which the initiates undertake.

In Emelumadu's *Dazzling*, Ozeomena is raised in an urban family with educated parents. Her father accepts his role as the tether for his brother who is known as the current leopard man of his family. Misfortune befalls him when he is killed by criminals. Ozeomena's father carries the guilt for

not knowing or being able to establish some kind of communication with his dead brother. This traumatic loss makes him abandon his job and family in search for some closure. He feels a sense of responsibility for being absent and powerless to prevent his brother's death. He tries to save his Odiogo's life on his operating table, he also tries to find his spirit through supernatural methods but he fails. This failure is his greatest enemy. The gossips soon tag him as a mad man. His wife, being the one who is most deprived of his presence in the family, also believes that her husband suffers from a mental health problem. Within Ozeomena's family, it is an open secret that Ozeomena is the chosen heir to the leopard powers. She is only eight years old when it is revealed. M'ma, Ozeomena's grandmother is accustomed to the traditional ways. She understands that the young boy who touched Ozeomena's itchy back during the burial is actually the same dead uncle bequeathing his leopard powers to his niece. As explained by Oruke, the leopards have a secret pact among the people. They act as a safeguard for the villages that they protect. However, the possession of the powers has certain conditions such as; voluntary acceptance, finding a tether, eating the leopard and the condition of dying. Other notable totems mentioned in Emelumadu's *Dazzling* include the python, and the hornbill but the most central totem in the story is the leopard. Because of Ozeomena's ignorance about her new role, her experience is unique when compared to Ike's character. M'ma explains that the death being referred to by Oruke is not a physical once-for-all-experience: "Do you imagine you will have just one life? As leopard, you will have many. What is one small death compared to all the lives you will live? (*Dazzling*: 96)" Except for the support that Ozeomena receives from M'ma, she has no guidance for her role as a young leopard. She navigates through various uncomfortable and unpredictable experiences before she finally yields herself over to the leopard. Ozeomena's mother, Prisca, outrightly refuses to accept any reason for Ozeomena's peculiar experiences other than science. The absence of any kind of initiation or training for Ozeomena, leaves her in limbo. There is notable absence of the unity of life in Emelumadu's *Dazzling*. Ozeomena's relationship with her older sister is replete with power struggle. Mbu is beautiful, troublesome and fierce. Her dealings with Ozeomena suggest that she believes in the leopard's totemic powers but feels that she would have been a better choice as inheritor. During one of Ozeomena's conversations with Mma, she explains that Ozeomena is fit for the role because Mbu: "...she will destroy herself if it means getting her

revenge on people. Her blood is too hot. There is more to being a leopard than that.' M'ma had touched Ozeomena's face. 'A leopard must be balanced. Justice, yes, but also compassion' (286). Mbu's later does experience some character development in the story, when she becomes more tolerant and protective of Ozeomena. Her previous attitude towards Ozeomena is a sharp contrast between their father's relationship with his brother. It had been noted that they were very close, but many did not know that the brothers were also bonded as leopard and tether. Again, there is an evident disconnect in Emelumadu's *Dazzling*, this time, in the relationship between the siblings. When this vacuum is filled, Ozeomena's confidence grows stronger and she finds the courage to let herself merge with the leopard.

A comparison of Ike and Emelumadu's stories reveal that inheriting the leopard powers from one generation to another, without cultural roots within the unity of life is a rocky transition for the heir apparent. Although Ike's character is also riddled with unanswered questions, his transition to acceptance is smoother than Ozeomena's. This is because the community and his parents accept the myth and history behind the leopard heritage. In Ike's *The Bottled Leopard*, there is belief in the ancestors, the *chi*, the Dibia and the masquerade spirits. This typology of spirits is widened in Emelumadu's *Dazzling* where there are categories of spirits which are antonymous to each other without eliminating the existence of those identified in *The Bottled Leopard*. According to Ukwamedua and Edogiaweri: "in Igbo worldview, therefore, spirits are classified hierarchically in reverse order, thus, masquerades, the ancestors, deities and the lipside (sic) of the ladder is the Supreme Being" (326). They also further classify the spirits as "good spirits" and "bad spirits". The trickster spirit who appears to Treasure at the market explains that:

This life just one go, but to come back, somebody from your family, from your lineage must give birth to you again. My friends and I...we all died before we could have children. We cannot live again if there is no lineage to carry us on. We will be forgotten, nobody to pour us libation and say our names. You can help us shey? If you help them, I promise, I will leave you alone, but the blood that does this must be new and fresh – pure – that is what

I hear. That is the only way it works outside the family line (*Dazzling* 114).

The credibility of the information can be called to question because he changes the number of brides that Treasure must find from time to time as he gives new conditions for meeting his standard. He meets all of Treasure's physical needs but nothing is ever free. He always expects something back in return for his favour. Treasure later realizes that her cooperation with the spirit and love for her father have worked against her. Akuabata, Treasure's mother, further complicates the negotiation with the spirit because of her greed and foolish pride. Being a sly negotiator, Treasure resorts to contacting a higher spirit called the Bone Woman, whom the trickster spirit fears, because she is skeptical about their previous agreement. Treasure soon finds out that both spirits claim to have custody of her dead father. But because of her desperate attempts to bring him back, she is ready to give anyone in exchange for her father. Later on, the Bone Woman tells Treasure that:

Your father, the great businessman, made his money sacrificing apprentices to the old blood-drinking gods who rewarded his loyalty only as long as he kept them in drink. And he got too comfortable and stopped... he knew a hard death was waiting for him, and his soul was in danger of wandering, being lost for eternity. So, he made a deal with me, for his reincarnation. He gave you to me. Like a chicken... I already owned you, and your precious lover spirit knew that. Tried to steal from me! My property (*Dazzling* 339).

Treasure also known as Nkili or Dazzling has been a victim of betrayals from the trickster spirit, her mother collected as much as possible from the spirit without counting the cost. Another category of spirits in *Dazzling* is the ancestor. When Ozeomena comes into the other worlds in her peregrinations, she finds a comfortable space which is congruent with the information she has received from M'ma and Oruke. This world is secure, beautiful and intricately designed. Her confidence is high and she recognizes her ancestor. She answers in the affirmative when asked about "eating" the leopard. In performing this ritual, all her choices are

independent. She eats the “wriggling flesh” (345) and drinks the broth of the leopard. After this, she declares herself as one with her leopard. They work as the enforcement of law and order among the spirits in the other worlds. Bringing to justice every offender despite having empathy for victims such as Treasure. Ozeomena carries out her duties and communicates seamlessly with her leopard. The fear of death no longer terrifies her as she continues trying to decipher the true meaning of death in her voyage of self-discovery.

Conclusion

This paper will conclude by examining the stance of the narrators and transitional markers in both novels. According to Bortolussi: “To attribute a serious authority to the narrator of magic realist narratives is to ignore the spirit of the mode, communicated by the textual properties of the works” (361). In *The Bottled Leopard* Ike’s narrator is more authoritative than ingenuous. The narrator becomes a character in his own right. This is expected according to *reedsyblog*. Ike’s narrator adopts the third person point of view although the narrator sometimes switches to second person narrative voice to draw the readers into the story. For example:

...For nothing could be greater fun than running with your playmates on the few occasions when the Supreme Being fired hail on the earth. You could never tell the direction from which to expect the next frozen ball of water, nor whether it would strike your forehead or your shin bone. To add to the fun, you competed with your playmates to see who would harvest the largest number of hail stones, throwing a hail stone into your mouth and feeling it disappear on your tongue was something else (58).

The quality of ingenuousness which Bortolussi highlights in her definition of magical realism does not describe Ike’s narrator. Nonetheless, the other identified qualities of the mode are evident. Emelumadu adopts the third person limited point of view in *Dazzling*. According to *reedsyblog*: “the narrator tells a story from one character’s perspective at a time...(np)” Emelumadu sometimes shifts the point of view to first person when focalizing on a particular character. This technique accommodates the

ingenuousness of the narrative voice through the character's thoughts, diction and actions. It also allows for the twists and revelations that occur in the eventual climax of the story as the reader understands that Ozeomena's journeys into other worlds are connected to Treasure's experiences and dealings with the trickster spirit. Both classmates realize their true identities of hero and anti-hero. Ike's chapters are numbered as 1-22. Emelūmadu's chapter titles are unconventional: they are named after either the hero or anti-hero attached with adjectives of time. For example: "Ozeomena Now" "Ozeomena Then" or "Treasure Now" "Treasure Then". Others are titled: "The First Bride", "The Second Bride" "M'ma's Story", and towards the ending of the novel, "Ozeomena: the beginning" and "The Departure". Emelūmadu's style enhances the experience of suspense that develops in the novel. The reader is able to understand the symbolisms attached to the naming of the titles.

Emelūmadu's *Dazzling* is interwoven between the recognizable world and the other-worldly places through transitional markers that oscillate in different events at the boarding school and at home. These include nightmares, fainting, outrunning her peers during exercise drills, an epileptic bout and a riot scene. Ike's transitional markers in *The Bottled Leopard* are structured because the Dibia performs the ritual which contain and control the activities of Amobi's leopard.

In addition, Emelūmadu's syncretism shines through in her choice of characters. It is said in *Dazzling* that a woman has never inherited the leopard. Her uniqueness translates to her declaration about being her own tether and the author of the rules for this new world. In *Dazzling* the cosmological worldview is filled with eccentric characters like the trickster spirit, the Nun and the Bone Woman. It is delightful to identify with characters in Ike's *The Bottled Leopard* and Emelūmadu's *Dazzling*, noting the adjustment to boarding school, naughty classmates, tyrannical seniors, and school administration policies. The peculiar manners of the villagers are described by Ike and the nostalgia in the exchange of love letters from the post office.

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