

## Chapter Twenty Three

### RITUAL DRAMA AND GENDER: A STUDY OF OGUNGUN-PIPE AT ODE IRELE

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#### **Introduction**

The ritual visitation of ancestors to the world of the living comes up every other year at Ode Irele. This performance sums up the ritual segment that attends Olofungbogho. The performance may be limited to the ritual arena and may include the road leading to the grove as in the case of the ritual segment prelude to the performance of *Ojoyejusu* (Yam Feast) when the scapegoat known as *Oluwen* (The Carrier of Phenomenal Load) purifies the land and people through his redemptive submission. It has diplomatic undertone, as female members are restricted and could only communicate with the ancestors tactically.

The second stage of the performance is the appearance of the carrier personality known as the scapegoat. He represents the accumulated guilt of the society, which he tries to cleanse in spite of the untoward consequences to him. The efficacy of the performance may not be in doubt but it becomes difficult to measure the interaction between the carrier and other phenomenal beings he supposedly pacifies in the course of the cleansing bid. If the spirit beings are physically present or manifests through spiritual sanction, it is difficult for the researcher to establish.

The visible aspect of the performance is the stage around the *Malokun* Shrine and other adjoining streets characteristic of *Odun Oba* too at Ondo (Ogunba, 72). The village squares in many indigenous societies are salient to performances and they serve as springboards that culminate in the rapturous climax upon the fulfillment of the ritual segment involving active bearers of tradition (Goldstein, 62-7). The creeks among dwellers in the riverine areas may be the launch pad whereas markets in many towns are significant stages for the exhibition of festival behaviours. The temporal setting too is subject to the whims and caprices of ritualists and the monarchs as well. Every society re-enacts the artistic sensibility of the milieu. Significantly, where fertility is the aim, the celebration may follow the planting season just as thanksgiving is associated with harvests.

Hegemonic festivals may follow the attitudinal behaviours of the subjects especially when palpable satiation seems to be the vogue. Harvesting season is apt for such a grand glorification of morality because voices of dissents are minimal and the subjects are less prone to rebellion. Therefore, peace is fundamental to the performance of the hegemonic

script. A period of warfare may be favoured for the fertility festival known as *Ere* in Ode Irele. The staging of *Ere* during an imminent war may remove the snag of bloodshed from the people. At such a time, the ritual song known as *Elujugbeleje* amplifies the primordial oath that war would never ravage Irele and her people. It is equally important that drizzles of rain are experienced during *Ere* which property restricts its performance to the raining season between July and August. The re-enactment of the eternal transition festival known as *Ijengen* in Irele may not be subject to a regimented time and season but depends on individual submission to the will of nature through death. The same dynamism permeates other transition festivals such as *Ju* in Igbobini riverine area of Ondo State and *Adamuorisa* in Lagos.

### Concepts and Definition

*Ogungun-Pipe* comes up every other year in Ode Irele and this nocturnal performance is the grand finale of *Ojoyejusu* festival. *Ojoyejusu* is equivalent to the cutting of new yams by chiefs and this comes up every August. However *Ogungun-Pipe* is the segment reserved for the night and comes up every other year to avoid monotony. *Ogungun* are ancestors who pay a visit to their offspring once in three years to reveal secrets, sensitize them about developments in both the physical and spiritual realms. However, only mature people at the time of death could visit their offspring. Those who must have died young may not relay messages from the ancestral realms because they are considered to be too young to dine with the ancestors. Only women are qualified to converse with these ancestors as men are banned from coming to the ritual arena at night.

### Application/ Analyses

By 8:30 p.m. every member of the society is expected to leave the public place. It is the case that the visitors must be ushered into the town through meet rituals and only a few members of the society are involved in this task. No one is allowed to witness the visitation of the ancestors. Everyone is wary of the implications of eavesdropping. Men are not allowed to receive the ancestors. They could stay awake but might not take part in the conversation. The two categories of performers are the celestial visitors consisting of worthy ancestors and their terrestrial hostesses during which both secular and spiritual scripts are deployed to the amazement of their hostesses.

The staging of *Ogungun-Pipe* comes up in the night to provide a leeway for the celestial visitors and amplify the fact that phenomenal beings are not to appear in broad daylight. Thus, the timing bestows an aura of strangeness on the performance. The setting equally explores the concept of duality typified by day/night, good/bad, human/metaphysical, activity/passivity etc. This periodic visitation is tied to the belief in the concept of ancestral potency. Equally salient to the visitation is the recognition of the religious differences of the folks and as such the ancestors may not visit people who do not subscribe to the belief in

ancestors. Such folks relish unperturbed in their beliefs but may not negate the sacredness of the sanctity of the performance.

Among the performers too, basic qualifications are required for participation at the arena. The age of members is significant just as parenthood is a veritable trait in the emergence of actors at the arena. Youngsters who died without giving birth to children and others who committed suicide could only whistle and lament that they did not give birth to children while on earth that could make provisions for them during their visit to the world of the living. This situation is a pointer to the significance of procreation. Even ancestors themselves would not tolerate the presence of such categories of people at the arena as they are often chased away from partaking in the meals provided for these celestial visitors by their relations. The whistles audible at the arena represent regret on account of a fruitless existence. The attitude of indigenous people may be evaluated from the attendant starvation and non-participation of fruitless ancestors in the performance. Barrenness is therefore synonymous with eternal starvation, stagnation and irrelevance.

*Ogungun-Pipe* achieves cohesion and relevance through potent intervention in filial issues. Matrimonial and other filial issues that could bring the society to a halt through conflicts and other domestic issues would be settled by the visitors. At times, references might be made to the bond subsisting among the warring folks and the need for a peaceful resolution advanced. This aspect of the performance becomes a potent instrument that endears the people to the festival. It is significant that debilitating succession crises have been resolved over the years.

Prophetic revelations equally characterize the interactions between the ancestors and their terrestrial hostesses. The performance becomes a timeless development as the visitors amply deploy uncanny revelations, warn folks of impending dangers, instruct them about the location, usage and herbal potency of materials within the environment as well as predict the consequences of an action or inaction. The celebration assumes a diplomatic significance as the pivot that directs traditional societies and makes the machinery of governance relevant.

### **Gender Politics in Literature**

Oral literature is replete with diverse references to gender. Every genre of literature harbours such artistic cum cultural preoccupations that dwell on gender. The objectives of indigenous artists may not be far removed from a conscious effort at phallic arrogance and the subservience of female members of the society. A sociological goal is suggested in the composition of these oral scripts. Imputed to these oral artists is the derivation of creative raw materials from their milieu. This development confirms the claim that artists are products of their environments and hardly could alienate the sociological aura prevalent in their areas as well as other contiguous societies from their scripts. The gender question exemplifies indigenous hermeneutics that are traceable to the founding fathers of the societies.

Indigenous societies are replete with several stumbling blocks on feminist attainment of physical and psychological potentialities. Yoruba indigenous society is no exception as

series of taboos inhibit women from taking part in many endeavours. Diverse authorities cohere in a dubious complicity to rob women of their participation in the socio-cultural development of their environments.

The biblical account of creation blamed the consequent negation of God's designed programmes and the disruption of the original, divine, pastoral complacency and bliss on women. Eve typifies the mythical image of a gender, noted by authorities, for negative inclinations rather than virtues. The patriarchal society cooks up assumptions and they become the rule. *Igogo* in Owo explores this association of women with some foibles that are anathema to the peaceful and evolvement of the society. Therefore, the symbol of animal-skin kept in the rafter refers to feminist negative first-order manifesting in nagging, loquaciousness and impurities that may be recalled upon the domination of human virtues by bestial qualities. The other queens too showed this baseness and are held responsible for the annual performance and atonement of the original sin. *Igogo*, therefore presents male folks as symbols of purity, spirituality and impeccability whose performative presence in the arena is on account of the involvement of the eldest queen who hails from Iloro quarters of Owo. This participation is a mark of condescension and favour towards the other sex.

In the same male isolation of feminist caste, *Egungun* masquerades are physical demonstrations of '*Oro*' (rite), which myths claimed was born by a woman. The religious association of woman with the birth of '*Oro*' (rite) is debunked through the isolation of the female gender from the various rites of the masquerades. The few women that are initiated into the cult have passed through spiritual purification processes and are no longer considered as women in the shrine. Their familiarity with ritual arrogates the nomenclature of '*Yeyeruku*' (pure women) on them. These women are believed to have been cleansed from their gender impurities and are forbidden from revealing cult secrets to their fellow women.

Except for these rare cases of female penetration into the ritual terrain, the involvement of women in most indigenous performances is at a minimal level and mostly in the execution of domestic chores. If women are barred from any active participation in indigenous obligations, *Gelede* is an example of feminist recognition and incorporation in a grand scale where gender conscious men play second fiddles. Ibitokun (1993) sums up the cultural sensibility of *Gelede* as an artistic emphasis of feminist spiritual and physical dignity. The performance is, therefore, a departure from the other male – practices in Yorubaland (70). The rhythms, drums and costumes tend towards masculine subservience and feminist superiority. Even where no visible conflict or subtle wrestle of power is involved in the performance of '*Olofungbogh*' in Ode Irele, the allusions to the double standard and ingratitude by the male folks towards Likoyi lament the helplessness of the situation. Festivals are consequently, ideological exhibitions employed by the diplomatic male caste through art to enforce masculine superiority and cultural sanctification of gender supremacy, and achieve a perpetual inferiority of female members of the milieu.

*Ogungun-Pipe* is peculiar to the people of Ode Irele as it harbours much significance both in the area of entertainment, diplomacy, exhibition of religious and cultural beliefs that may not dawn on non-members of the society. This peculiarity corroborates Beardsley (1958) that meaning is culturally illuminating. This is because there is a relationship between regional meaning and local meaning and the context is relevant and fundamental to meaning (131).

Meaning depends on language, non-verbal elements such as gestures and the ritual imports of both nuances and references that may be instrumental in co-referentiality between the performer and the audience. Various ingredients constitute the creative raw materials and apart from the imaginative well being which, no doubt, may be informed by societal contradictions, the prevailing social climate and peculiarities are vital to communication. The identification of basic sociological tools for which Taine (1965) remains a rallying point is a reconciliation of the artist, the text and his milieu as fundamental vehicles for expressing 'the image of the society, the social attitudes', mannerisms and their representations in literary creations. (Preminger, 168; Strasser, 9, 117, 119)

Consequently, indigenous art is an embodiment of both entertainment and indigenous hermeneutics. This is because the exhibition of periodic sensitization is embedded within art where entertainment becomes the paramount tool of integration of the communal spirit. Periodic convergence at the arena is usually at the instance of the leaders and attempts are made to inculcate the collective desire of the milieu on the people through tacit delivery where art becomes the instrument of propaganda. The performance may equally incorporate the beliefs and values of the milieu. Corroborating the preceding claim, Tolstoy (1965) considers art as transcending pleasure but a paramount tool for uniting the artist with the audience. From this, standpoint, festivals become a consciousness, 'one of the conditions of human life' (301). They thrive on codes and signs because the achievement of the artistic quest of the people may not be divorced from the significance they attached to language over the years. If the transmission of a consciousness is the ultimate in art, language is the rallying point of creativity. Consequently, Belsey (1980) becomes apposite mainly in her delimitation of the non-transparency of language, its individuality, uniqueness and ideological conditioning (4 - 5). From the foregoing, Bateson (1972) opines that communication/performance is enhanced through 'a metaphor or some awkwardly abstract formula' (116)

The appreciation of style... is less likely to vary: the different metrical and rhetorical devices, the particular genre, and the choice of 'lopoi' are all inherent in the particular artifact, always available for the careful reader to recognize... (117)

If the apprehension of meaning is central to poetics, the attempt may not be confined to a monolithic criterion as text harbours diverse imports and capable of further freshness, depending on the explorers' available tools. Therefore, no critical method may unilaterally unravel meaning, as it is 'intertextual' and subject to the linguistic peculiarities of every community.

Because archetypes, primordial images that seem to reside deep in the self or the civilization, often find expression in works of art and in rudimentary folk stories, the criticism centering on them usually transcends 'literature' as formalism conceives it (Hadin, 43)

Hadin's analysis shows that the text, artist and the myths are influential to the formation of normative judgements on any work of art. The wisdom in locating the text within a number of factors in which myths and milieu are significant aspects stems from what Hadin (1989) considers the text to be; drawn mainly from a 'family portrait', and its being a mere 'face in the crowd, a dot in the diagram' (46)

Consequently, the contributions of Freud (1971) to the explication of indigenous practices reveal the susceptibility of indigenous art to capture the cultural values of the age. His thesis on the father archetype being the primal force in the creation of the universe, for instance, is salient to the metaphysical aura attendant on indigenous performances (626 - 7). Freud's recognition of the "super-ego" and the attachment of the "psychological group" to the concept of an immanent being and other phenomenological beings explain this ritual liturgy. Freud's association of cultural, artistic and social creations with the influence of 'sexual impulses' conditions festivals to be a form of social control through which societies are regulated and placed in the mainstream of cohesion, decorum and continuity.

We believe that civilization has been created under the pressure of the exigencies of life at the cost of satisfaction of the instincts; and we believe that civilization is to a large extent being constantly created anew... (Freud, 22- 3)

The plausibility of Freud's statement lies in the location of artistic and social creations within the 'sexual impulses'. The indigenous head of every Yoruba community represents the body and soul of the land; the prime motivator and partaker of every ritual. He is an embodiment of the physical and spiritual essence of the milieu. The festival songs consist of prayers for longevity, wealth, fertility and peace. These songs are ritualistic, solemn, and representative

of a grand occasion when natural order is accorded an aura of supernatural. These songs are rhythmic and 'free' (Wolff, 47).

Taine (1965) considers future artistic creations in whatever refined dimensions to be subject to this primordial artistry (262). Modern African writers, in spite of their modernist employment of genres draw a lot from the repertoire of indigenous art. Consequently, the cultural and artistic creation of indigenous artists reflects today in the three genres of literature. Festivals are artistic means of entertaining the people and directing their attention from 'instinctual forces' otherwise known as the 'sexual instincts' toward 'socially higher' directions such as art and economic ventures (Fre 23). Festival periods are, therefore, synonymous with periodic excitement through performance and it reflects the collective consciousness of the people and may define them especially in the area of religion and disposition to materialism.

Structuralism attempts to capture the total essence of a people from the reality presented in the text through a quest for meaning from the 'secondary, deeper level of signification' (Lefkowitz, 60). This model considers meaning to be subsumed in images, signs and practices. No doubt, indigenous art is an embodiment of signs and gestures. It thus requires an examination of these iconic signs to explicate festivals and place them in their proper perspectives. It is in the light of this that festivals may be seen as scripts that are capable of arousing different reactions from the audience depending on individuals' level of internalization of the signs and symbols subsisting in the milieu.

According to Anozie (1981), structuralism is structure specific and devoted to the isolation of internal unities and variations. This is what Taine (1965) considers 'internal concordance and contrarities' (262). The ambiguity in Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism that critics seem to have glossed over is the contradictory presence of sociological and archetypal ethos within its framework. The structuralist enterprise, particularly, the recourse to diachronism and the quest for reductionism may be achieved through a conscious admission of the indispensability of history, myth and the milieu. The claim that structuralism is structure specific is negated through reductionism's identification of the various parts of the organic whole, and by implication, the last part coheres with variables traceable to history and the cultural peculiarities informing linguistic co-referentiality. Consequently, this present study considers the various critical models to contribute to the totality of reality present in a text; such that only a collective harmonization of the diverse meaning can unveil the meaning of a performance.

## Conclusion

The performance of *Ogungun-Pipe* reveals basic underlying summations within the Ode Irele milieu and a plausible universal correspondence on ideological projection. Apposite to the gender exclusion characteristic of indigenous Yoruba world is the cultural attitude to female folks, hinging on the presence of an assumed conflict between the dominating phallic members and the subservient counterparts. The recognition of a possible recalcitrance on the part of women necessitates the fashioning of a performance that keeps them perpetually in check while they are deceived about their importance that bestows on them the singular qualification to appear before these holy ancestors. Thus, the resolution of a rebellion that might be insoluble at the rational physical plane may be responsible for the emergence of this performance. This recognition informs the recourse to the metaphysical plane for sensitizing folks and resolution of problems in view of the helplessness of people before celestial inhabitants. The arrogation of the father figure to the ancestors expresses the search for patriarchal model beyond the terrestrial parallel. Thus, efforts are made to restrict women in any ritual endeavour.

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*Thematically speaking,  
Cliff Nwanna's "Drummer"  
is reminiscent of Ezenwa Oheato's  
"A song for the Drummers".*