

IGBO CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY POETS AS AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SAGES

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Abstract

A cursory glance at the historical development of Western philosophy reveals the categorization of some poets as Western philosophers. Through their poetry, they were able to make philosophical contributions. These Western poets include: T. S. Eliot, Hildegard von Bingen, Homer, Percy Bysshe Shelley, James Wright, Marianne Moore, Pablo Neruda, William Carlos Williams, Mary Oliver, Rainer Maria Rilke, Leslie Marmon Silko, Robert Creeley, Fernando Pessoa, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Bataille, and so on. With the argument of some western thinkers and those of African thinkers who were trained in the West that Africans have no philosophy peculiar to their worldview, the occasion has once again arisen to look into the development of thought in Africa, especially in the area of poetry, to see if there are African thinkers whose contributions in the area of poetry can be categorized as philosophy. This piece has made this study and submits that African poets, through their critic of society qualify as philosophical sages.

Keywords: Poets, Igbo, African, Philosophical, Sages, Open Society, Philosophy.

Introduction

Sage philosophy is a trend or school in African philosophy that was developed by the Kenyan philosopher, Henry Odera Oruka (1944–1995). Through interviews with sages from traditional groups, he identified philosophical sages in different cultures who were more of the repositories of cultural wisdom. Kanu (2015) avers that he divided them into two groups; the first he called Folk Sages, who embodied community wisdom; the second he called Philosophical Sages, who held a critical stand towards that wisdom. From his findings regarding philosophical sages, he concluded that the West and Hountondji were wrong in saying that Africa has no philosophy. His research showed that philosophy existed in traditional African thought.

Oruka (1991) engaged in this philosophical investigation so as to counter three claims that undermined the 'philosophiness' of African philosophy. These claims include:

- i. that while the Greek sages use reason, African sages do not engage in philosophic thought;
- ii. African sages are part of an oral tradition, whereas philosophic thought requires literacy. This was also targeted at undermining African thought as unphilosophical;
- iii. African traditions encourage unanimity regarding beliefs and values and discourage individual critical thought;

Oruka's responses to these views shaped what is today called Sage Philosophy. Oruka (1991), defines Sage Philosophy thus:

...the expressed thoughts of wise men and women in any given community and is a way of thinking and explaining the world that fluctuates between popular wisdom (well known communal maxims, aphorisms and general common sense truths) and didactic wisdom, an expounded wisdom and a rational thought of some given individuals within a community. (p. 28).

According to Masolo (2006), Oruka had very definite ideas about who qualifies as a philosophic sage and how such persons are to be distinguished from other sages. These qualifications are as follows: first, the tendency to express dissatisfaction with the status quo belief system of their communities is an important critical component. Dissatisfaction sometimes motivates the philosophic sage to advance the knowledge that everyone has by subjecting it to scrutiny in order to determine its validity and worth. Second, is, while philosophic sages may still share with others some customary practices and beliefs, or aspects of them, unlike other members of their community, they emphasize rational explanations and justifications of courses of action. They owe greater loyalty to reason than to custom. As a result, not only are sages often a source of new knowledge, but they are also a catalyst to change within their communities. It is from this background, especially of the criticism of the *status quo* that this piece studies Igbo-African poets as Igbo philosophical sages.

Poets of the Igbo Spazio-Cultural Horizon

Poetry is from the Greek word *poiesis* which means *making*. Nwokeye (2016) defines poetry as "a form of literary art which uses aesthetics and rhythmic qualities of language, such as phonaesthetics, sound symbolism, and metre to evoke meanings in addition to, or in place of, the prosaic ostensible meaning" (p.

4). They display imagination and sensitivity along with eloquent expression, clothed in distinctive style and rhythm. Coleridge (cited in Nwokoye 2016) avers that “poetry is the blossom and the fragrance of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language” (p.2). Those who develop poetry are called poets. And those who produce poetry who have come from the Igbo extraction, are referred to as Igbo poets.

Igbo poets are a breed of African poets that speak to their fellow men and women. They are endowed with more lively sensibility, enthusiasm and tenderness, and have a greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul than you find among the community of human beings. These poets, being Igbo, belong to the spatio-cultural horizon of the Igbo cultural space. The Igbo, according to Onuh (1991), by way of definition, is both a language and the name of an ethnic group or tribe in Nigeria. The Igbo is a recent development in literature; they were formally called Ibo, Ibu, Eboe, Ebo, Egboe, Heebo and Hackbon. This is evident in literatures that emerged from between 1840 to 1940, basically the works of European missionaries like Schoen (1842), Baiki (1856) and Meek (1944). There is, however, an etymological and lexical complexity surrounding the meaning of the term ‘Igbo’. In the contention of Ekwuru (2009), the difficulty of arriving at a precise etymological and semantic clarity of the word “Igbo” has its trace in the unprecise nature of the history of the Igbo people. For Afigbo (1975a), compared to the state of research as regards origin in relation to other tribes in Nigeria, the Igbo history can without much exaggeration be described as *terra incognita*. However, Afigbo (1975b) further observes that the Igbos are not indifferent to this crisis of identity. Their experience of colonialism, and even the Biafran War has sparked off in them the quest for a historical identity. It is such that Isichei (1976) avers that no historical question arouses more interest among the present day Igbo people than the enquiry “where did the Igbo come from?”

As regards the territorial identity of the Igbos, Uzozie (1991) observes that “To date, there is no agreement among ethnographers, missionaries, anthropologists, historians, geographers and politicians on the definition and geographical limits of territory”. The Igbos speak the same language which gradually developed various dialects but understood among all the groups. Their cultural patterns are closely related, based on similar cults and social institutions. Two theories have emerged in response to the question of the origin of the Igbo. There is, *the Northern Centre Theory* which Onwuejeogwu (1987) posits that the Igbos migrated from five northern centre areas, namely: the Semetic Centre of the Near and Far East, the Hermatic Centre around Egypt and Northern Africa, the Western Sahara, the

Chadian Centre and the Nok Centre. The second historical hypothesis is the *Centre Theory of Igbo Heartland*. According to Jones (cited by Isichei 1976), the early migrations of the proto-Igbo originated from the areas termed as the Igbo heartland, such as: Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu and Awka divisions.

Geographically speaking, Njoku (1990) posits that Igbo land is located in the South Eastern region of what is known as Nigeria. The southern part of Nigeria exhibits a wide variety of topographical features. It is situated within the parallels of 6 and 8 east longitudes and 5 and 7 north latitudes. As a culture area, it is made up of Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia and parts of the Delta, Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Rivers States of Nigeria. According to Uchendu (1965), in its status as an ethnic group, the Igbo share common boundaries with other ethnic groups: eastward, the Yakos and Ibibios; westwards, with the Binis and the Isokos, Warri; northward, with the Igalas, Idomas, and the Tivs, and southward, the Ijaws and Ogonis. The discussion on the Igbo historical roots is engaged in to help frame conceptually, the idea of Igbo poets.

Igbo Open Society and the Philosophical Enterprise

Igbo open society and the adventurous spirit of the Igbo individual has aided the reception and promotion of philosophy among the Igbo people. The Igbo society is one in which the constituent individuals are clothed with self-confidence engendered by their open society and the belief that one individual is as good as the other. The Igbo open society has an imprint on individual openness to new realities, new ideas, new methodologies and ability to adapt to new circumstances. When the missionaries came to Igbo land, the Igbos were opened to Western education, accounting for their academic successes and the graduation of large numbers of Igbos in the 1965-1966 from academic institutions. The Igbos are fiercely progressive, republican and democratic. As progressives, independent of the government, they build their own schools, roads, town halls, village libraries, dig their own boreholes, etc. As republicans, they had no king with any significant power. They operated a political system in which decisions concerning the future of the kingdom were reached through discursions, consultations, dialogue and compromise.

As individuals and individual communities, they compete among themselves in the area of success. The Igbo person is known for auto-determination or a certain radical independence of mind, a certain basic sense of individual sovereign-ness which co-exists with the communal sovereignty of *ikwu na ibe*, *obodo*, and *mba*.²³

This radical independence of mind, for good or bad, permeates the whole of the Igbo person's character. The Igbos are not tied down by religious fundamentalism or traditionalism as in the North and West respectively. The openness of the society and individuality of the rational person keeps them outside the parameters of pursuing projects of exclusivistic ethnic unity or trying to outplay other ethnic groups. Their open society, freedom from the constraints of fundamentalism and traditionalism allowed reason and reasoning to progress alarmingly. This became a pre-condition for the exponential development of philosophy and philosophizing. It is from this background that Igbo poets would emerge to question the rational of Igbo religious, cultural, economic, political and social realities.

Igbo Classical and Contemporary Poets and Poetry

There is a very strong connection between Igbo poets and sage philosophy. I have categorized them as sage philosophers because of their abilities and the great role that they play as seers and critics of society. Thus, Oruka (1991) defines sage in the philosophic sense "only to the extent that the person is concerned with the fundamental ethical and empirical issues and questions relevant to his society and his ability to insightful solutions to some of those issues" (p. 3). Establishing the link between poetry and philosophy, Coleridge (cited in Nwokoye 2016) writes that "No man was yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher" (p. 2). Oruka (1991) writing further avers that, "Retuning to the question of the relation between sage and philosopher, in a strict sense, a sage has at least two abilities, insight and ethical inspiration. So, a sage is wise, he has insight, but he employs this for the ethical betterment of the community... A sage proper is usually a friend of truth and wisdom" (p. 9). They are not just critics, but seers- visionaries.

Igbo poets as seers, like the eagle see beyond what their generation sees. From the happenings in the present, they are able to conceptualize the future and speak to their generation about what lies ahead. As social critics, they have a high sense of commitment towards the society to reshape the community- they challenge malicious conditions. They can be referred to as reformers of the society. Thus, Adeoti and Elegbeleye (2005) and Agunwa (2014) would think that poets shape, sharpen and change the consciousness of society as a positive reinforcement for the transformation of the world. They criticize societal ills like child abuse, violation of the rights of the poor and weak, among others. Below is a random collection of Igbo poetry

At a time when agricultural policies were abortive rather than conducive to growth; at a time when people in the helm of affairs used their positions to cause miscarriage in the system; taking the funds meant for the growing of roots and tubers for the breeding of animals, Nsugbe (cited in Nwokoye 2016) criticized the agricultural policy of the time and called for a go-back to a national agribusiness development policy:

Agụ na-agụ anyị.

Agụ na-agụ anyị

Ọ bụnị Chukwu ga-arụlụ anyị ọlụ?

Akpụ na ji ndị be anyị ji elijua avọ.

Ọ bụlụ na e nweta ego a ga-enye

Ndị ọlụ ugbo.

E weli ya nye ndị millionja faama

Va nweli ya zuka ọkọko

Zuva ewu, zuva evi

Onye na eliro nli

a na-eliro anu...

We are hungry

We are hungry

Will God come and work for us?

Cassava and yam used to feed themselves.

*The money mapped out
for the farmer.*

Was given to big time farmers

They use it to breed chicks

Breed goat, breed cow

He who does not eat food

cannot eat meat.

Okonkwo (cited in Nwokoye 2016), after some period of observation and study, criticizes the war between Aguleri and Umueri; it was a war that was based on the struggle for land. The author shows the uselessness of the war, as lives and property are wasted, and those who fight die without reward. He reminds them that while they fight and die, the land remains.

Aguleri na Umueri na-eme nwanne

Ma ọbu ginị na-ese okwu?

Anị na-enye nsogbu

Aguleri gbava egbe.

Umueri gbava egbe.

Aguleri na Umueri eweputero

Tuwentị pulotu si umuaro ndi nulu ogu

Ka unu keve n'ama n'ama...

Onye nweli ani kote okwu.

Onye nwuru ma ani adj...

Aguleri and Umueri are brothers

But what is the problem?

Land is the problem.

Aguleri begin to shoot gun.

Umueri begin to shoot gun.

Aguleri and Umueri did not bring

Twenty plots for the youths that fight

To share in their clans...

He who ferments trouble because of land

The person dies but the land remains...

Ezeuko and Anowai (1989) wrote a poem on life, in which they try to draw the attention of their generation and beyond to the meaning and value of life. For the authors, life goes beyond the temporal.

Ndu abughi oriri na onunụ
Ndu abughi ole aku i nwere
Ndu abughi onye afo ukwu
Ndu abughi onye ihe na-agara nke oma

Life is not about eating and drinking
Life is not about how wealthy you are
Life is not one with big belly
Life is not about who is successful

Ndu di uzo abuo
Ndu uwa na ndu eligwe
Aja a churu maka ndu eluuwa a
Bu ya na-eduba na udu eluigwe
Gini kandu bu?
Noro dozie uzo

There are two types of life
Life on earth and life in heaven
Sacrifice offered for life on earth
Is what takes one to life eternity
What is life?
Stay and amend ways

Nicho uzo nyere mmadu aka ka ndu di
ihunanya na eziumume na-enye ndu
Nsopuru na ime ihe di mma
nihu Chineke na mmadu na-enye ndu
O bu ihe ndia na-eme ka ndu too ogologo
Ma dikwa utu

Life is in seeking ways to help others
Love and good character gives life
Respect and good works
Before God and man gives life
These things prolong life
And also make it sweet

In a poem titled *Mmadu*, Nwadike (2006) reminds the human person, who sometimes carries himself/herself in pride, of their origin and the emptiness of life. He hopes that the discovery of the emptiness of human life would help the human person to tolerate and love the other.

Mmadu
Cheta na ntụ ka i bu
Chetakwa na ntụ ka i ga alaghachi
Kwusi ajo ihe nile i na-eme
Kpazie agwa...
...onye ya na Chineke di mma...
Onye ahụ ka Chineke zoputaworo

Human being
Remember that you are ash
Remember also that you are returning to ash
Stop all the evils that you are committing
Behave well...
...he who is in good terms with God...
Has been saved by God.

Nwadike (2006) wrote the poem *Mahadum Naijiria*. His focus was the lecturers in universities who pull down one another through the defamation of the character,

delay or stopping of the promotion of one another. He describes and speaks of them in a way that generates reflection.

Lee ha ndi ochieze	Look at them, deceptive smiles
Ndi na akwada ibe ha nala	Those who pull one another down
Leekwa ha ndi eziokwu koro nonu	Look at them, liars
Ndi ochichiri buru ihe utu	Those who glory at wrongs
Leekwa ha, ogwumagalaba	Look at them, chameleons
Umu Ikwiikwii Umuusu	Owls and bats

Onyekaonwu (1989) wrote a poem titled *Ahia Onicha*. He criticized the lawlessness, harassment, robbery, and all the evil deeds taking place in Onitsha market.

Notu akuku I ga-anu	At a corner one whom hear
Onye ahia m, I chorọ ole?	My customer how many do you want?
Nakuku ozo	By the other side you would hear
Holam! Holam!!	Catch him! Catch him!!
O bu onye ohi o	He is a thief oh!

Ikediadi (2003) also criticizes the evils taking place in Onitsha:

Obodo Onicha	City of Onitsha
Obodo ndi abalidiegwu	City of armed robbers
Ndi jiri abali mere abali	Those who turns night into day
Ma were ehie mere abali	Day becomes their night
Ulo obula ha wakwutere	Any house they invaded
Egbe na mma ana ada	Shooting of guns and clinching of machetes
fill	
	everywhere
Anyammiri ejuputa anya obula	Tears fill every eyes
Obu ana eti kpim! Kpim! Kpim!	The heart beats fast
Mkpu enweghi ike iputa n' onu	The mouth cannot shout
Nihi iwu ndi abalidiegwu na-enye	Because of the orders the robbers give

In a poem titled *Chara m ka m kpara ego*, Nwaozuzu (2006) the current quest for money among the young, which has led to all kinds of societal ills like murder, robbery, disrespect etc.

Ego ka chorọ	Money is what is wanted.
Etu o huru ya si bia	Let it come anyhow

Onye choro ima?
O buru udele si gho
O buru udele si gho
Ma si ego zobe ka mmiri

Who wants to know?
One can even turn to a vulture
One can even turn to a skunk
But let money rains like waters

Ikediadi (2003) mourned the ineptitude and deceptive character of Nigerian ruling elite in his poem- showing how they have turned out to be habitual liars and notorious predators.

Ndi Ochichi
mgbe una putura aririo
onu unu na-atọ mmanu anu
unu kwere otutu nkwa ma tii tii ma rii rii
otutu nti nuru nkwa ahụ kudara ume
hopes

Political leaders
When you came canvassing for votes
Your mouth was sweet like honey
You made a lot of promises
And those who heard the promises had

The Igbo poets in these poetries, have taken their time as seers, to see deep into the truth of the Igbo society, and as social critics, they have made critical comments about individuals and society that could effect changes in the society.

Conclusion

Poets in Igbo traditional society have the primary responsibility of entertaining, educating, exposing into in-depth knowledge and evaluating the character of people for the purpose of social transformation and restoration. At these points, even at entertainment, the poet makes critical comments on issues and events to pass a lesson to leaders and the general public. Beyond persons, there are times he/she raises fundamental questions about the nature of reality. They do not just condemn and satirize the public and individuals, they are objective in their approach to social issues during which they commend as well as condemn public and private acts. They play various roles, exposing distortions and representations within the political system, and challenge stereotypes, myths, and the image of society; having challenged these, they recast them through stories-prose, poetry, essays and books for the young to read and be transformed.

During times of war, poets transform themselves into warriors of peace; with a proclivity of action over rhetoric, and armed with ancient wisdom, they work towards the peaceful resolution of hostilities. In the past, as part of the dialogue, they raised challenging questions about the subjects of the day- imperialism, slavery, independence, gender, racism, etc. The purpose of their commitment is to broaden the world's understanding, appreciation and conceptualization- it is

sometimes a politics of representation. This is more interesting as art and community are linked together in Igbo ontology; unlike Western academic art, Igbo art cannot be purified or distilled of real life or traces of the vitality of the street. Art is involved with the people and far from the posture of a rarefied atmosphere. Writing of the connection between poetry and society, Achebe (2012), the African poet posits:

I believe that it is impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest. In my definition, I am a protest writer. Even those early novels that look like very gentle re-creations of the past- what they were saying, in effect, was that we had a past. That was the protest, because there were people who thought that we didn't have a past. What I was doing was to say politely that we did- here it is. So commitment is nothing new. Commitment runs through my work. In fact, I should say that all of our writers, whether they were aware of it or not, are committed writers. The whole pattern of life demanded that one should protest, that you should put in a word for your history, your traditions, your religion, and so on. (p. 58).

Poets, from the foregoing, are therefore, not sidelines. They are not sidelines writing footnotes or glossaries when the event is over. They are of the brand of philosophical poets in Western philosophy, such as T. S. Eliot, Hildegard von Bingen, Homer, Percy Bysshe Shelley, James Wright, Marianne Moore, Pablo Neruda, William Carlos Williams, Mary Oliver, Rainer Maria Rilke, Leslie Marmon Silko, Robert Creeley, Fernando Pessoa, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Bataille, and so on. The works of these Igbo poets, categorized as Igbo philosophical sages belong to philosophy of literature, a branch of aesthetics. Some of their poetry, can be thought of as a sort of a thought experiment in ethics: since it describes fictional characters, their motives, their actions, and the consequences of their actions- leaving lessons for human beings in society to emulate. Plato believes strongly that literary culture has strong influence on their consumer. This explains why in the *Republic* he called for censorship of literary materials. Poetry pose questions concerning the issues truth and language. These poets are called philosophical sages, not because they possess or are custodians of wisdom, they are because they raise critical questions about wisdom and the society.

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