The contexts and functions of Igbo oral poetry

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Abstract

Poetry according to Egudu (1975) is in the first instance literature. Literature consists of a number of major genres and poetry is one of them. According to Finnegan (1977) "…the effect a piece of poetry is likely to have depends not on some permanent characteristics in the text itself, but on the circumstances in which it is delivered, the position of the poet, and perhaps on the native and wishes of the audience". It is this striking statement of Finnegan above that the researcher tries to identify specific contexts and some notable functions poetry perform in the Igbo literature. Igbo oral poetry plays a lot of roles and is sung in several contexts. By context here, we are talking about situation or occasion in which this particular kind of literature is performed. We have general distinction based on context in various Igbo tradition for instance Ifo or Folktales is an Oral performance distinguished in terms of context as they are told in the might for entertainment. The Igbo Oral Poetry performs specific functions to the audience and the performers alike. These various functions of Oral poetry are distinguished from their context on the basis of

what use they are put to as against where they are performed. It is quite difficult for a layman to distinguish between the two as they interwove. The role Igbo oral poetry play in one situation could change in another situation therefore the function Igbo Oral poetry perform is very much related to the context. This work however is limited to the context these poem are sung and some recognizable functions they perform.

1.0 Introduction

Egudu (1975) sees poetry as a method of expression. According to her, poetry expresses thoughts by means of suggestion and invention. In poetry what is invented or created consist of images, rhythm and sound and these are employed for suggesting what the poet wishes to express.

Poetry has been classified by many Igbo literary scholars. For instance, Nwadike (1992:51) classified poetry under the following headings:

Folk entertainment poems	– abx ifo
Praise poems	– abx otito
Satiric poems	– abx ikpe/ nkqcha
Lamentations	– abx akwa ar[r[/iriuju
Childbirth / Lullabies	– abx nwa
Ritual	– abx ntqaja
Occupational	– Abx qrx
Social	– abx qha

Natural phenomenon – abx echiche miri emi
Love poem – abx [hxnaanya
Narrative – abx akxkq
Epic – abx akxkqdike
Historical – abx akxkqala
Didactic – abx nkuzi
Invocation – abx nkpoku etc.

2.0 Types of Igbo oral poetry

For the interest of this study, we are going to group the above classification into two broad categories. This is to enable us look at them judiciously

Panegyric poetry – Abx Otito
Elegiac poetry – Abx Akwa

2.1 **Panegyric:**

According to Hornby (1985), panegyric: is a speech, piece of writing, praising a person or event. Geddes & Grossest (1994) sees it as commendatory, encomiastic, and eulogistic commentary on a person or a creation. It then follows that all Igbo poetry or poems of praise fall under these group. They include:

Abx otito d[iche iche d[ka –
Childbirth/Lullabies - Abx Q]x Nwa
Love poem - Abx {hxnaanya
Ritual - Abx Ntqaja

Divination poem - Abx Afa
Invocation - Abx Nkpoku dgz.

Praise poems most of the times feature heroic themes. They are meant to praise the heavenly for his creations, the warrior for achieving feat or even to praise a wonderful lover for his/her cares and comfort etc.

2.2 **Elegiac poetry:**

Elegiac poetry on the other hand, is poems or songs of sorrow, especially for the dead. Elegiac poetry condemns death and reveals philosophy about life and death.

Some Igbo Elegiac poetry includes:

Burial poem - Abx Qnwx
War poem - Abx Agha
Lamentation - Abx Akwa Ar[r[/ Iri Uju
Satiric poem - Abx Ikpe/ Nkqcha

3.0 The context of Igbo oral poetry

Finnegan (1997) says "...another point worth noting is the significance of local interpretations of a poem or of poetry in general terms, abstracted from the particularities of the culture in which it occurs."

The various types of Igbo poetry therefore can feature in different contexts. However, it is worthy to note here according to Leonhard (1973:84-85) who says "…when I used occasionally to read poetry and was asked what I was reading, I use to say I was

reading songs; it was always asked then what sort of songs-prayers, war songs, courting songs, or songs for singing when accompanying a bull. Eventually I decided to call poems "sitting songs" which at least suggested some sort of purpose which they might serve. Therefore, some of the context of Igbo oral poetry include:

3.1 **Context of nationalism**

In the context of or the period of nationalistic movement, a lot of songs are composed to motivate people for the struggle. For instance, during the struggle for Nigeria Independence, songs like this were composed –

Nigeria had independence -1960 Nigeria nwere independence
By next year, we become free - N' afq qzq, any[enwere onwe any[.
Azikiwe Nnamdi Okpara - Azikiwe, Nnamdi, Okpara,
Try heard so that we rule ourselves. - Jisienu ike ka any[chiwa onwe any[.

3.1.1 **Political campaigns**

Also in the context of political campaigns, Igbo oral poetry features greatly. They are used to satirize, praise or even condemn politicians. During 1979 federal election in Eastern Nigeria, a lot of songs came up and they were meant for winning support for the party and an eventual winning of the election. They include:

NPP

Where are we going to vote - Kedx ebe any[ga ebinyi aka
Where a human is drawn - Ebe e sere mmadx
Let us go and vote where a human is drawn. - Ngwanx ka any[ga
vote o ebe e sere mmadx ....

NPN

Young men where are we going? - Xmx Okorob[a ebe ka unu na-aga
Don't ask me that - Ajuz[na m etu ahx
NPN party for mother and son - NPN party Nne na Nwa
Its pays us - O mere any[pay ooo …..

3.1.2 **Divination and rituals**

In the context of divination/rituals, certain songs are used to invoke the spirit and invite them to the performance. People equally use songs to perform certain rituals as they use chants for divinations like the Yorubas (Ifa divination chants) and the Rwandan panegyric chants. Among the Igbo too we have chants like this:

People shout we are the people – Ibe any[kwenu q bx any[
We are the people – q bx any[
Mischief maker try us not – Osingo esina any[
Mischief maker try us not – Osingo esina any[
If it is from right – aka nri
We are there – any[nq ya
If it is from left – aka ekpe
We are there – anyi nq ya
Every where it comes – ebe qbxna osi
We finish them – any[anxq ha
I bobo a – I bobo a
Hoo a – hoo a

3.1.3 **Moonlight plays**

During moonlight plays, a lot of songs are used for entertainment. Some oral performances are accompanied with songs during such situations. For instance, they can dance in turns while singing the song below –

Who will dance 2x - Onye ga-agba egwu 2x
Iyaa will dance 2x - Iyaa ga-egba egwu Iyaa 2x
Ngozi will dance 2x - Ngizi ga-agba egwu ….
Iyaa will dance 2x – Iyaa ga agba egwu

Iyaa - *Iyaa*

3.1.4 **Festivals**

Another good context for Igbo oral poetry is during festivals like ofala, funeral ceremonies and even traditional legal proceedings. A lot of songs are learnt and sung in commemoration of such ceremonies. Also, songs are enjoyed greatly in the context of religious ceremonies. Here people sing various songs in praise and honor of their creator (God).for instance, this poem can go for a woman who is newly married and she is leaving for her husband's place.

Voice: Our daughter is married - Nwa any[ejebe di
Chorus: Yoo yoo – Yoo Yoo
Voice; Let it be well with you as you get there - I jeruo nqdx mma
Chorus: Yoo yoo – Yoo Yoo
Voice: Remain your self - Jidekwa ka iji
Chorus: Yoo yoo – Yoo Yoo
Voice: Bear Children there - I jeruo mxta nwa
Chorus: Yoo yoo – Yoo Yoo

3.1.5 **War situation**

In the context of war, a lot of Igbo oral poetry comes into play. These poem arise out of an emotional outburst and the psychological feeling that songs could ginger men into action. Also

an aggrieved heart releases tension through songs and chants. During Nigeria/Biafra war, the song below was very germane.

Where are you from 2x	- Ebee ka Unu si 2x
Biara 2x	- Biafra 2x
We shall not leave Biafra	- Anyi agaghi arapx B[afra
And go to live at another place	- Gawa ebe qzq ga biri
Biafra will be alive ndx	- Biafra ga-adi

The poem below is equally sung during wars.

I Yoo maganga	– I maganga
Maganga maganga	– maganga maganga
I yoo maganga	- iyoo maganga
Maganga is a war song	– maganga bx egwu agha
I yoo maganga	– iyoo maganga
The number of heads you kill	– isi ole I gbutere
Iyoo maganga	– iyoo maganga
Will show your strength	– ka eji ama dike
Iyoo maganga	– iyoo maganga
Fear not etc.	– egwu adikwala dgz.

Context is very much related to function because we have war songs and works songs. These two songs are geared towards gingering the warriors or the workers and are only distinguishable on the basis of what use they are put to as opposed to where they

are performed. A look at the functions of Igbo oral poetry below will help to clarify issues.

4.0 Functions of Igbo oral poetry

One can't just embark on a list of the functions of Igbo Oral poetry as this would mean embarking on an endless task. This does not mean that some major functions of Igbo Oral poetry cannot be identified. They include:

4.1 **To soothe situation**

Igbo oral poetry allows for the convention whereby things can be said in a poetic medium that could not be altered in a more direct form. In fact, it is as if the expression in Igbo oral poetry takes the sting out of the communication and removed it from "Real" social arena yet, communication still takes place. Insults and hostilities that could not be spoken are expressed in songs in such a manner that it palliates

4.2 **To reduce boredom & release tension**

Igbo Oral poetry can create excitement and aesthetic pleasure in a participatory audience that are doing a tedious or even painful laborious work e.g. work-songs. It can be used to pass away time thereby providing an outlet for tension and frustrations. People who are contending with boredom or oppression or even grief can control or come to terms with it by expressing it in the literary form of poem.

4.3 **Provide an outlet for frustrations**

During wars, Igbo oral poetry has provisions for war songs which are used to arouse war like spirit among participants. Here, some of the poems serve as outlet for frustration and a channel for informal social protests within self.

4.4 **Provide the channel for the communication with the dead**

Igbo oral poetry can also provide a channel for communication with the dead. This is made possible during religious ceremonies – rituals, traditional performance and even for recreational purposes. Under this situation, it helps to give meaning and weight to an event for the participant and for the village as a whole.

4.5 **Education of electorates**

Igbo oral poetry can also be used in educating the electorates during elections as in the Eastern Nigeria (1983) when the party symbol of one of the political parties (NPP) was a human being. The song below was introduced and used in directing the electorates on the right place to cast their votes-

Where shall we vote - Kedu ebe any[ga ebinye aka
Where human being is drawn - Ebe e sere mmadx
Let us go and vote - Ngwanx ka any[jee vote o
Where a human being is drawn – ebe esere mmadx

4.6 **Other functions**

Other commonly found functions of Igbo oral poetry include: rituals of healing, ventilating disputes (either intensifying or resolving them), exerting social sanctions against offenders or outsiders, providing for the articulation of man's imaginative creativity, realizing a desire to grasp and express the word in beautiful words, adding solemnity and public validation to ceremonial occasions, providing comfort and some means of social action for the bereaved or oppressed. (Finnegan 1977)

5.0 Conclusion

Igbo oral poetry is as old as man. It's plays significant roles in various contexts. This work brings together various kinds of Igbo poetry into two major categories namely, the panegyric and elegiac poetry. Various contexts of Igbo oral poetry includes: Nationalism, political Campaigns, Divination and Ritual, Festivals, wars and a host of others.

The Igbo oral poetry also has among others the following functions: to soothe situation, reduce boredom and at the same time, to release the tension, educate electorate etc. Therefore, Igbo oral poetry can be used to reconcile, divide, maintain established authority or undermine it, propagandize, innovate, conserve, soothe, satirize to mention but a few.

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