

## *The Performance Aesthetics of Igbo Satire*

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to describe and analyze Igbo satirical performances in order to bring out their aesthetics and meaning. Satire is a prevalent activity, and almost every aspect of human endeavor can lend itself to satirical expression. In Igbo society, occasions such as traditional festivals, moonlit-night plays, and other social events typically invite satires and their performances. In these performances, artistic talents are put into visible and audible form through songs and dramatic sketches, which are performed to entertain and ridicule and expose deviant behavior in the community. Since a clearly defined code of morals exists, infringements of the laws may lead to severe penalties for victims. Satire is a common weapon with which to punish all categories of offenders.

In the earliest times, the most common application of satire in Igbo culture was for social reform, and ridicule and assault were its primary weapons. But, while providing censure, ridicule also served as a rich source of amusement. Satire's gradual development from a moral tool to an entertainment tool occurred because of the pressures mounted on the Igbo by European colonialists for a cultural change. Eventually, the establishment of a formalized legal system and several other factors gradually curtailed the impunity with which the Igbo satirized the deviants of society.

### INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to describe and analyze Igbo satirical performances in order to show their aesthetics and meaning. This study's paradigm is Ihiala, an Igbo town in the Anambra State of Nigeria, and the author's hometown. Since almost every aspect of human endeavor can actually lend itself to satirical expression, satire is a prevalent activity in Igbo communities. In Ihiala, occasions such as traditional festivals, moonlit-night plays, and other social events typically invite satires and satirical performances. In these performances, artistic talents are put into visible and audible form through songs and dramatic sketches, which are performed to entertain as well as to ridicule and expose deviant behavior in the community. Since a clearly defined code of morals exists in Ihiala communities, infringements of the laws may sometimes lead to severe penalties being inflicted on the perpetrator. Satire is a standard weapon with which to punish all categories of offenders.

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application of satire in Ihiala was for social reform, and ridicule and assault were its primary weapons. But while providing censure, ridicule also served as a rich source of amusement. Satire's gradual development from a moral tool to an entertainment tool occurred because it succumbed to the pressures mounted by European colonialists for a cultural change.

However, a critical point about the satirical performance of Ihiala is that it usually constitutes part of a larger performance. So, we shall examine satire's progression from the earliest times so as to set the pace for an understanding of the analysis of the performance aesthetics of the present, the archetypal form of satire.

Because the range of offenses in the communities invariably influenced the severity of punishment for an offender, satire had to be gendered and referred to as male or female. This point can bear repetition, given that the author has written extensively on Igbo satire before now. The categorization is necessary to understand the transformation that has taken place in the satirical practice since its early manifestations.

### **MALE SATIRE**

Male satire was used to denounce major crimes such as stealing and all abominations. Some offenses stand before others in magnitude, of course. Three of such offenses are murder (especially the killing of a kinsman; also included in this category is suicide), yam stealing (especially the stealing of seed yams after they have been planted), and incest. In Ihiala communities, these are regarded as atrocious offenses which violate the laws of man and nature. Despite these offenses' gravity, there was little compunction in committing murder, theft, incest, and other misdemeanors. These grave offenses were invariably accompanied by direct physical abuse.

The performance of male satire was usually extemporaneous. Immediately after a criminal offense such as stealing or an abomination was committed and discovered, an alarm was raised, attracting people to the scene and rousing them to appropriate action. As soon as people arrived at the scene, satirical songs were begun about the culprit, usually from a repertoire of such songs already in existence. Tradition demanded that in the case of an abomination, purification ceremonies must be duly performed to initiate the ritual cleansing process. Members of the crowd would most probably know the songs as they may have been sung several times before to

denounce similar situations. The culprit's attributes and other details of his/her personal life were usually worked into the appropriate slots in a standard song. Identical themes were repeated with different turns of phrase, and significant effects were achieved in that way. Characteristically, these communities have always teemed with gifted people, and some of them in the crowd may spontaneously compose appropriate songs that would add to the existing repertoire of such songs.

### **FEMALE SATIRE**

Female satire was used to deride minor offenses such as promiscuity, quarrelsomeness, laziness, and so on. Female satire was not accompanied by physical assault but publicly used the culprit's name and attributes to achieve satirical effects. These two types of satires existed simultaneously, each serving its purpose whenever the need arose. Unlike male satire, the performance of female satire was not extemporaneous but planned. For instance, if a young girl had been discovered to be pregnant before marriage, members of her age group would hasten to initiate a public denouncement of her behavior. Her peers would collect satirical songs that they would sing during moonlit-night plays and other social gatherings.

### **ARCHETYPAL SATIRE**

Although archetypal satires are pre-planned, names are hardly mentioned. The encounter with the early European colonialists and their intervention in most of the Igbo's existing cultural practices finally forced satire to make a transition to a more "acceptable" form of criticism. A wide range of archetypal satires has been accumulated from a repertoire of both male and female satires. In archetypal satire, nobody is singled out for special mention and embarrassment. People who have committed a type of offense are collectively derided. Archetypal satires reinforce the device of indirection – a device that has been utilized by satirists of all ages because of the dangers that satire has always entailed. Such were those dangers that Juvenal, the most powerful of all the Roman satirical poets, had to declare that he would write only of the dead. The impact of colonial presence in Ihiala brought alive the dangers associated with satire to the community's satirists, thereby helping in the transition of the early form of satire. In archetypal satire, the audience may or may not know who is being satirized, and that factor keeps the audience attentive and focused on the songs, that is, on the art of criticism rather than on the object of criticism. As in other satirical forms, the songs become public property as soon as they are

presented during a performance and are sung by peer groups, women and children, and privately in people's homes.

### **THE PERFORMANCE OF SATIRE**

The satirical performance does not require elaborate rehearsals, but some form of rehearsal is needed to acquaint the performer with the basic movements for performance. Traditional musical instruments are used and are assigned to those who have attained proficiency in the handling of such instruments. The typical instruments are maracas (oyo) and amusical pot (udu). The people who handle them are usually experienced and gifted people who need little time to rehearse what would be sung. After some songs have been accumulated and the compilers have agreed on the dance patterns, they now present them before a larger group at the rehearsals.

This rehearsal takes place at the venue of the performance just before the actual performance. This is because the performers do not necessarily need to master the dance patterns to achieve total satirical effects. As long as they have a basic idea of the dance pattern, their individual dance innovations contribute to enriching the performance. In this type of performance, the message is given prominence in the songs, not the dance moves. A satirical performance is used during a traditional festival to exemplify this discussion. The "Idaji" is a festival in honor of the yam, the king of all crops in Igboland. The festival is usually planned to herald the planting season. Within this larger festival, there is a ceremony, which is an entirely female affair. Membership of the female group is limited to young unmarried girls, and during the ceremony, there is a predominance of satirical singing and their performances.

The custodians of the culture decide on the actual date for the festival, and the venue is usually the village square. While the main festival is going on, the girls would organize themselves and start their own activities. First, they would block a major entry to the village square and line fresh palm fronds across it. Then they would demand token gifts of cash from people before they are allowed to enter the arena. After that, they would begin their operations and unleash their satires on erring community members, particularly members of their age group.

Before the activity begins, the girls chat and laugh with one another in anticipation of some great entertainment. They view the performance as an occasion for the release of tension and the expression of a mental state different from their daily routine. At the whistle's sound, the

executive members would call the group to order and ask the members to form a circle; the lead singers and those who play the instruments would be at the center. The actual performance begins when one of the executive members gives a signal to one of the lead singers to start a tune. As the tune is started, it is followed by hand-clapping and drumming on the musical pot. Then the lead singer raises her voice:

Ngee k'asi n'akpo n'iro?  
Ihe anyi n'anu ihea omere eme?  
Obu onye k'okwa turu n'ikpu?  
Ugwu nwagbogho nwere emebisiena  
Ihe okwukwo iza oku oputunwakwara anyi?  
Nnu na ncha anyi, onye jini ha?  
Nwa asi na adi ime ya, onye bu nna?  
Nwa asi n'amuru ihea onye bu nna?  
Nne akwoona aka tiere okuko aki  
Nna akwoona aka tiere okuko aki  
Hei, ihe n'eme, hei, ihe n'eme!  
Ihe ogo j'enye anyi akwakwaana anyi  
Ji mmiri oku ogo akwakwaana anyi  
Gwa onye mere ihea si ya n'anyi choro ya  
Ihe akpiri n'eme n'uwa ebuka  
Ebughi eme anyi n'aso emeena  
Anyi j'ekwunwakwani okwu n'ogbo?  
Okwa aturuna fefuo  
Onye ma m'obu obu j'abiani ozo  
Obu turu puo uchicha abata  
Efere mkwuchi ekpugheena na njo!  
Omuru nwa enweghi nna kwara puo  
Ijeenani izu tokiri na mpio

What do they say?  
Is causing the confusion out in the streets?  
Who is it that the partridge picked at the vagina?  
The pride of a woman has been ruined  
Shall we still get our share  
Of the bride's presents?<sup>1</sup>  
Our salt and soap, who has them?  
The child that they say is being expected  
Who is the father?  
The child that they say is born

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<sup>1</sup> It is usual for the young bride to be presented with gifts on her first visit to her husband's home. These gifts would normally include articles of clothing and other items such as salt, soap, smoked fish, etc. When she returns home, well-wishers pay her a courtesy visit and are equally presented with token gifts of wraps of salt or a cake of soap.

Who is the father?  
The mother has done a futile job  
The father has done a futile job  
Hei, things happen, hei things happen!  
What an in-law would bring  
We have missed  
Yam pepper soup that an in-law would provide, we have missed  
Tell whoever did this that we want him  
What greed does in this world is great  
The unusual that we have been trying to avoid has happened  
Shall we ever speak in public?  
The partridge has picked and flown away  
Who knows whether the cuckoo will be next?  
The cuckoo picks and goes  
The cockroach will come  
The dish has been recklessly opened!  
She who bears a bastard  
Should pack out  
You have gone to steal  
But got trapped in the hole

In a community where everybody knows everybody else, the specific girl to whom the satire refers is known by everybody. The most persistent subject of the satirical expression in Ihiala is misdemeanor against sexual morality. The shame and ridicule associated with sexual immorality need no further emphasis. The song speaks for itself. It is mainly through singing that satire may be adequately expressed. Singing helps satire to perpetuate its deterrent effect because it is through this vehicle that it reaches a broader audience. If satire is removed from that context, it may lose its license and may even be viewed as a lampoon or invective.

Singing also enables satire to be performed, and the context of performance helps the singers to maintain their dignity and self-respect as they perform their tasks. Judging from the sentiments expressed in the song above, one gets the impression that not just one individual has been defiled but the entire community. It might be necessary here to point out that in Igbo traditional communities in general, no word is considered too indecent for satirical expression. Such things as certain parts of the body, which in say, Western societies, are rarely publicly mentioned, are brazenly uttered without any attempt to hide behind euphemistic terms. We shall explore the next song, which is also on the subject of premarital pregnancy:

Kwenu Ezeude  
Ana m asi Ezeude

Obu ara ni dara ada k'ana ekwu?  
Chikara, chikara, ya k'ute jiri kaa  
Agbogho ara gi adagwo  
Obu mkpoo gi afa ihe ija eme?  
Ara dara ada n'omebigwo  
Ara dara ada n'ozugwo  
Okwa nu ogbe ikpu k'obu aga  
Okwa ogbe ikpu nwa inyanga  
Nekwa odogoro ihe nwa oji aga  
N'ara gi adagwo nakpuo

Everybody shouts Ezeude  
I am telling Ezeude  
Is it those sagged breasts they are talking about?  
Chikara, chikara, that was why the mat got worn  
Young girl, your breasts have sagged  
If I call your name  
What will you do?  
The sagged breasts, they are no more good  
The sagged breasts, they are enough  
Is it the broad vagina that she is parading?  
Is it the broad vagina of the proud one?  
Look at the hollow thing (vagina) she is parading  
Get married, your breasts have sagged.

The satirical singer's strategy is always to demean the target, and in this case, she intensifies the heat by painting a vivid picture of the sagged breasts by her numerous repetitions of the phrase – five times in all. By that repetition, the singer implies that the breasts should sag only when a woman becomes pregnant and nurses a baby within marriage. In some cases, other girls who have within that period been victims of the same offense will be equally derided, even though songs may have already been made of them. That shows that the punishment for sexual misdemeanor continues to arouse interest until the victim finds a husband. Under that platform, all the girls who have, in some way, broken a societal norm are publicly made objects of derision.

With each song, the performers begin to dance according to the rehearsed patterns and appropriate additions to accommodate individual performers' talents. Through these movements, which are familiar to the community, it is possible for them to understand what is being enacted. Movements in satirical performance are not random. Every movement is objective, deliberate, interpretative, and precise, and calculated to communicate.

At the mention of “Chikara, chikara, ya k'ute jiri kaa,” for instance, the performers move

in a provocative fashion to portray the act of reckless sexual abandon, which is being satirized. “Chikara, chikara,” an onomatopoeic term, signifies the ferocious movement of the culprit on the mat, which has consequently caused it to wear. Again, at the mention of “A nasu n’ekwe” (drumming and chorusing), the performers pretend to be beating the drum which is an exaggeration of the sexual act itself.

The girls actually make no effort to dance in a carefully rehearsed pattern, as every performer is capable of dancing in a style that blends with the singing, the clapping, and the drumming. As the dancing warms up, the singing and clapping, and drumming attract other spectators to the scene, and their arrival compels the performers to perform more spiritedly. Since the audience is a participatory one, it is usually encouraged to join in singing the chorus. Where there is a difference, the lead singer urges the audience to pay attention and to reply correctly. This helps not only to get the audience’s attention but also to enliven the performance.

The accompaniment’s volume is reduced when the words of the song are meant to deliver a message. The song and the drumming alternate; when one is high, the other is low. During the chorus, the drumming subsides but comes up again afterward. At the end of the song, the drum gathers momentum, and the audience dances until the lead singer either starts the song again from the beginning or changes to another song. Ropo Sekoni has rightly observed that in any instance of such a performance, the singer and the audience “are not only concerned with an examination of the dominant values of their community but are also interested in the encapsulation of such discourse in an aesthetic form.”<sup>2</sup>

Since the song will dictate the type of movement, the performers make body movements that demonstrate disapproval of the emotions implied in the song. The spectators, who have become participants in the performance, try to imitate the performers’ continuous body movements. Because the performers and the spectators belong to the same community and may know the culprit, some spectators may engage in a discussion of her identity while the performance is going on. Enoch Mvula makes a similar point in his analysis of the “Performance of Gule Wamkulu,” where he reiterates that, “Members of the audience know each other and are

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<sup>2</sup> Ropo Sekoni, “The Narrator, Narrative-Pattern, and Audience Experience of Oral Narrative Performance,” in *The Oral Performance in Africa*, ed. Isidore Okpewho (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd., 1990) 142.



aware of the events which have been the source of much gossip in the village.” Some of them talk to each other, indicating that the song refers to so and so, who is part of the crowd. They point at him and laugh as the performance goes on.<sup>3</sup>

As the performance progresses, the performers and the spectators intensify their clapping of hands and singing of the chorus in response to the rhythm of the song, the sound of the instrument, and the clapping of hands. They move their hands, legs, head, shoulders, and neck in unison with the song and hand-clapping as the performance builds to a climax. The spirited dancing causes dust to rise (if it is the dry season) as the performers sweat and the spectators cheer and laugh heartily.

The chorus enables the spectators to participate in the performance. Most often, there is a repetition of some lines, which contributes to the rhythm and substance of the song and the performance. The lead singer may use facial or oral expressions to delineate the character of the satirical butt. For instance, she may enlarge her eyes to depict excitement or twist her mouth to depict ‘anger’ – all to the spectators’ entertainment.

This research reveals that the ability to sing satirical songs does not detract from one’s social status. If anything, it temporarily uplifts the singer’s standing in the community – if only for as long as the performance lasts. This is because a talented singer/performer enjoys her audience’s undivided attention; hence, she is held in high esteem by her audience during an outstanding performance. Some singers surpass others in terms of quality of voice and subtlety of language. This is why it is not uncommon to hear some audience members make such complimentary remarks as ‘Onu gi bu akwasa’ (your voice is magnificent) or ‘Onu gi bu ogene’ (your voice is a gong) to a talented singer during a performance.

The reaction of the audience depends on the mood of the occasion and the quality of the performance. It can easily be observed that the success of any performance depends mainly on the singer. Therefore, it is his/her utmost responsibility to exploit his/her creative impulses in order to achieve this success.

To this effect, D.I. Nwoga and R.N. Egudu state that “The performer is therefore expected

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<sup>3</sup> Enoch S.T.Mvula, “The Performance of Gule Wamkulu,” in *The Oral Performance in Africa*, ed. Isidore Okpewho (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd., 1990) 91-92.

to show expertise not in the building up of a complicated sequence of thought, but in the variety of expressions with which he can state, expand and deepen a single statement. When it succeeds, it is a marvelous exposition of imaginative wealth.”<sup>4</sup> However, this research does not provide any evidence to suggest that the ability to sing and perform satires confers high status on the singers outside a performance situation.

### CONCLUSION

The yardstick for assessing a performance lies in the ability of the lead singers to excel in those expressions, oral or facial, that help them establish their point and extemporize. It is not unusual at specific points in the singer’s performance to reach out to the audience or a particular individual in any way that he or she deems fit. In Igbo traditional performances, there is a great degree of interaction between the singer/performer and his or her audience. This interaction may be by way of comments or choral response. The comments can be favorable when the audience pays its compliments to a singer for an excellent performance. Sometimes it can be unfavorable, especially when the audience feels that the artist is not performing well. A negative comment can take a devastating toll on the morale of the performer. However, unlike the charlatan, the talented and experienced performer can hold his grounds even in the face of adverse comments and defend his art. If the performer is indeed incompetent, he may be unnerved, but he may use it to his advantage and build his reputation if he is accomplished. In some cases, however, the performer may plead with his detractors that he be left alone to conduct his performance his own way. This provision for challenge and defense by the audience and the performers is one of the significant distinctions between oral and written literature.

Outside of their performances, certain artistic qualities of the songs are unfortunately lost. The written versions have been stripped of the mode and tone of actual performances since the tone is an essential aspect of satirical songs. Lost also outside performance situations are poetical qualities, and the general atmosphere pervading the singing of the songs. As a result, it is difficult to assess the poetical qualities of the songs fairly. It is perhaps impossible to list everything that is involved in a performance: the movements, the facial expressions, the dramatic actions and dance, the mimicry, and so on. The aesthetics of a satirical performance may be said to derive

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<sup>4</sup> D.I. Nwoga and R.N. Egudu, “The Oral Presentation,” in *Igbo Traditional Verse*, (London: Heinemann, 1973) 5.

essentially from the rhythmic clapping of the hands, the rhythmic body movements, the singing, the language of the songs, the facial expressions to depict a myriad of moods, the participation of the spectators and their imitation of the performers – all of which synchronize to contribute to the beauty and the semantic content of the song and the performance as a whole.

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