

**The form of rhetoric in Igbo traditional literature:
An inquiry into the meaning of life.**

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ABSTRACT: *Igbo traditional poetry is remarkably different from the literary poetry. Both the traditional and oral literary poetry originated from the oral literature. While the traditional poetry is purely indigenous, the oral literary poetry possesses creative innovations or embellishment added by the writer. Essentially, most Igbo traditional poetry are anchored in either aesthetics value or in religion. This calls for a study of the poet's work as an inquiry into the meaning of life. The study of the form of the rhetorics of Igbo traditional poetry embraces both the external nature and features like chants, invocations, magical spells, divination, and prayer, as well as repetitions, paradox, proverbs, and other figurative expressions. Emphasis is on how the traditional Igbo poet has used his art as inquiry into the meaning of life and what he makes out of this inquiry.*

Introduction

Rhetoric is synonymous with an art of persuasion. In any writing or speech act, rhetoric is applied whenever the intention is to have serious impact or influence on the audience. The rhetoric influence may or may not always be totally true or sincere in the ideas generated, but an experienced rhetorician always uses his skill to elicit meaningful results or actions from the targeted audience. Due to its affiliation with political slogans and advertisement, rhetoric has often been associated with science. Boulton states that:

Rhetoric originally meant the art of persuasion, and was recognized early as a science for which rules could be provided. The first full textbook was Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (322-320 B.C). In the Roman civilization, Cicero and Quintilian wrote important books on the subject and a number of lesser Greek and Roman theorists contributed to the subject. At first it included both valid reasoning, later distinguished as logic, and the tricks used in argument; it has gradually come to mean mostly the tricks (149).

Persuasion used in rhetoric does not only demand charisma but also high ability to induce an evocative feeling into the mind of the listener. This can be described as word power. Evocation itself can be both emotional and sentimental. Understandably, the progenitors of rhetoric must have developed deep sense of empathy which was applied to make their disciples dance to their tones. From the foregoing, it is

obvious that rhetoric started from the oral tradition before it developed to the written. The early Greece scholars started from the oral tradition before they evolved a system of the written text. Socrates for instance did not write his dialogues down but the world got knowledge of him through Plato. The different phases of development of the scientific method equally affected the development of logic as the classical scholars did not benefit much from the scientific knowledge.

Aristotle who developed logic as his method of reasoning might not obviously have had science at the back of his mind. Today logic has highly developed as a system of sound and valid reasoning. These developments have equally embraced rhetoric and its theories. The Igbo like other races of the world are transforming from the oral to written tradition. Igbo Literature has its style and language which is uniquely different from the Greek, Roman or English. The elements that make up the Igbo rhetoric are quite different from those of the other races. The Igbo proverb for instance could be studied under verse and prose, as well as the Igbo idioms, riddles and jokes. All these aspects of communication and social interaction are used in human speech act, which is related to rhetoric.

Theoretical / Historical Background

Rhetoric could largely embrace the theory and ability of adequately applying speech act, either in oral or in written form. According to Duckworth, "Rhetoric defines the rules that should govern all prose composition or speech designed to influence the judgment or the feelings of people. It therefore treats all matters relating to beauty or forcefulness of style". (Encarta) From its inception and development, rhetorical theories have passed through different phases. Starting from the classical to modern period, the study of rhetoric has attracted the attention of great scholars. In the ancient Greek Empire, Plato conventionally attributed serious relationship to rhetoric and democracy. An article published in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* states that:

Plato located the wellsprings of rhetoric in the founding of democracy at Syracuse in the 5th century BC. Exiles returning to Syracuse entered into litigation for the return of their lands from which they had been dispossessed by the overthrown despotic government. In the absence of written records, claims were settled in a newly founded democratic legal system. To help litigants improve their persuasiveness, certain teachers began to offer something like systematic instruction in rhetoric. In this experience at Syracuse, certain identifiable characteristics become prototypical: the *rhetor*, or speaker, is a pleader; his discourse is argumentative; and members of his audience are participants in and judges of a controversy. Later, in Athens, these

characteristics began to aggregate to themselves some serious intellectual issues (*rhetoric*).

The early teachers of rhetoric were later given the name Sophists in Athens. These teachers instructed scholars on methods of argumentation, as well as offering rhetoric as a central educational discipline. They also insisted on the usefulness of rhetoric in the analysis of and study of the origin of argument and education.

The Greek philosopher, *Aristotle*, in his book *Rhetoric*, marshaled out the functions of rhetoric to include not only persuasion but “discovering all the available means of persuasion” (*rhetoric*). Aristotle placed emphasis on the need to win argument by the use of persuasive application of truth, instead of moving of their emotions or sentiments. He paralleled rhetoric to logic. A major aspect of Aristotle's work on rhetoric is that it is not a productive art of making but an art of doing; this encapsulates power used in some aspects of speaking. The Greek teachers of rhetoric later extended their influence to Roman instructors. Their influences were remarkably noted in the works of Cicero and Quintilian.

During the age of Quintilian, three intellectual issues had become firmly fixed within the orbit of rhetoric. Two of these were consciously faced: (1) the relationship between truth and verbal expression and (2) the difficulties of achieving intellectual or artistic integrity while communicating with a heterogeneous audience. In a sense, both of these issues were not faced at all but dodged, as they had been in the past, with the implicit assumption that wisdom and eloquence were not necessarily synonymous and that truth and integrity were ultimately dependent upon the character of the speaker. From the classical period through the medieval, rhetoricians started seeing their practice as specie of methodical, solitary progress toward literary creation.

The study of rhetoric in the Renaissance period dwelt more on the works of such classical writers like Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. William Shakespeare exhibited his mastery of the art of rhetoric in some of his major tragic plays. In some cases, this rhetoric was used for persuasive purposes. A good example is found in his *Julius Caesar* where Mark Anthony's emotive speech roused the Roman plebian to mutiny. Apart from its use in political slogans and advertisements, literature exploits rhetoric in various ways such as in figures of speech aimed at achieving remarkable impact on the readers.

In modern period, there has been a remarkable revival in the study of formal rhetoric. This was encouraged largely by the efforts of the exponents of the linguistic science referred to as semantics. Modern scholars and philosophers who made impute in this sector include the

British literary critic LA. Richards. The American literary critics Kenneth D. Burke and John Crowe Ransom have also made their contributions to this study which has spread through major English speaking countries.

The Igbo Rhetoric

The Igbo rhetoric does not share the same traditional pattern with the English, Greek and Romans. Igbo traditional and political oratory is uniquely different from the English and other Western cultures and traditions. The communicative strategy of Igbo traditional literature is not only oral but has divergent connotations that call for extra caution and mastery in its interpretation. According to Duckworth:

Indeed, the search for the rhetoric of non-Western culture has become a crucial scholarly and political endeavour, as people seek bases for dialogue across tribal and national boundaries. The true rhetoric of any age and of any people is to be found deep within what might be called attitudinizing conventions, precepts that condition one's stance toward experience, knowledge, tradition, language and other people (*rhetoric*).

In analyzing the rhetoric of Igbo traditional verse, there is the need to be acquainted with the basic stages of the content (i.e. the issue communicated). Form connotes a kind of physical appearance, manifestation, shape, or exactitude of a given substance. According to Burton:

Rhetoricians divided form and content not to place content above form, but to highlight the interdependence of language and meaning, argument and ornament, thought and its expression. It means that linguistic forms are not merely instrumental, but fundamental not only to persuasion, but to thought itself. ("Silva Rhetoricae"*rhetoric*)

The points above can further be traced to Aristotle's idea distinguishing the *logos* (i.e. the logical content of a speech) from *lexis* (i.e. the style and how a speech is delivered), or to Quintillian (a Roman author) who equally makes the difference in what he termed *res*, that is division of consideration of things or substance, and *verba* which has to do with proper examination or analysis of verbal expressions. The different natures of form and content can be tabled as below:

<i>Form</i>	<i>Content</i>
a) How issue is communicated via	a) The issue communicated
b) Physical appearance, shape, exactitude of substance.	language b) Kernel of a substance or microcosm of the macrocosm
c) Language	c) Meaning

d)	Argument	d)	Ornament
e)	Thought	e)	Expression of thought
f)	Instrumental	f)	Fundamental
g)	Logos	g)	Lexis
h)	Res	h)	Verba
i)	Matter	i)	Means
j)	<i>Okwu</i>	j)	<i>Ka esi kwu</i>

The major issues to consider while studying the form of rhetoric of Igbo traditional literature are to emphasize the oral content and the Igbo understanding of what constitutes poetry. Igbo traditional poetry was communally owned and was transmitted by word of mouth before the encounter of Igbo scholars with the colonial masters. The era of literacy has made it possible for some Igbo traditional poetry to be documented in written forms at present. An example is *The Igbo Traditional Verse* compiled and translated by Romanus Egudu and Donatus Nwoga. For the average Igbo, most poetry is closely associated with songs. These songs are functionally used in praises, prayers, writing, wars, masquerade displays, celebration of activities like child naming, *ozo* title taking, burials, initiation, etc.

This paper focuses on the form of rhetoric and rhetorical devices (like personification, metaphor, simile, analogy, euphemism, hyperbole, litotes and others) used in Igbo traditional poetry. Various aspects of phonetic forms (like intonation, free verse) are studied as well as the uses of repetition (like chants, magical effects, etc). Other literary devices are equally studied while doing the analysis of the Igbo traditional poetry.

Proverbs as form of Igbo Rhetoric

Proficiency in the use of Igbo proverb is the hallmark of a seasoned Igbo rhetorician. It is often referred to as the condensed wisdom and experiences acquired over many years and expressed in a compressed manner. Proverb is to the Igbo man a school of a sort. It can be compared with grammar, logic and rhetoric which were classified in the medieval period as three of the several liberal arts that the university students should study for the first four years of their admission. Other liberal arts then included music, geometry, arithmetic and astronomy. According to LU. Nwadike, “the proverb is a form of speech which is pregnant with meanings. More often than not, it confounds the unintelligent and even the intelligent that is not used to the form.”(4) An Igbo grammarian, M.N. Okonkwo, in his study of Igbo proverbs, came up with the following observations:

Igbo proverb is often used to begin addresses.

One who cannot understand proverbs is generally looked upon as inexperienced, naive or even foolish (i.e. *ofeke*).

Igbo proverbs reveal a lot about the Igbo themselves.

A number of proverbs reveal the unrecorded history of the Igbo.

Igbo proverbs are also based on Igbo customs.

Igbo proverbs have three levels of meaning: the philosophical, the literal and the contextual (107-108).

According to H. Chukwuma, “the proverb realizes its full form and meaning when it is applied to situations outside itself, that is to say, its contextual aptness.”(23)

The following proverbs give contextual meanings because of the occasion or situation in which they are used:

The pursuer after the innocent fowl

Is doomed to fall down;

The stick used for removing a millipede

Is often thrown away with it;

One who has not eaten the *udala* fruit

Never suffers from the disease caused by it;

For one who holds on to *owho*

Is never lost in a journey (Egudu 35)

Translated by Egudu under the group of oral traditional poems classified as incantation poems, the above proverbs realize their full form and meaning as poetry because they are applied to situations other than themselves. Their contextual aptness here is on caution. The manner in which the proverbs is broken into lines have also given them the form of verse, thereby making them poetry in the context. Each of the proverbs above can be further explained by the other proverbs. Examples:

Sample 1: The pursuer after the innocent fowl
Is doomed to fall down;

Explanations: (a) Let the kite perch, let the eagle perch (live and let live) or
(b) A house is not set ablaze due to the provocation of a rat.

The motif in sample 1 is warning against malice or witch hunting, especially of innocent persons. Whoever engages in acts of wickedness is bound to fall while the innocent always win the race.

<u>Sample2:</u>	The stick used for removing a millipede is often thrown away with it;
<u>Explanations:</u> (a)	The benevolent always earn benevolence, while the wicked end wickedly (The good works of a man is often what guides him in life), Whatever a man sows, that he shall reap.

The motif in sample 2 is that a bad thing goes with a bad thing, while the good goes with the good. If examined from the philosophical levels of meaning, the above proverbs are teaching the reader the lessons on the laws of nature. The first proverb is indicative of a person who has clean hands and does not have problems or life adversities while the second teaches the Igbo concept of duality, "*ife kwulu ife akwudebe ya*" These proverbs can further be literally analyzed from the context of Igbo people where it is used. The Igbo believe that the just shall live by faith and also that there is always a cause for every effect.

Idioms as form of Igbo Rhetoric

Idioms are fixed phrases that have peculiar meanings that are different from that of the separate words of which they are constructed. In essence, what an idiom is saying is not possibly interpreted or elicited from the immediate sense that the sentence is trying to convey. The meaning of idioms are fixed and accepted under a given circumstance as what the idiom means. This must never be re-interpreted to suit some people who often try to do so. Igbo idioms are orally transmitted and so are communally owned. They exist in a given culture as forms of rhetoric expressions. Their cultural leaning makes the Igbo idiom have stock qualities that fade out or change in content if translated to other languages.

For example, the idiom "*afo ita mmadu mmiri* means that "somebody is very wicked and unrelenting." If translated into the English language, the phrase will look like: "one's stomach is dried of water." The idiom does not have anything to do with stomach, and has equally lost its communicative value when translated from Igbo to English. This problem of loss of meaning makes it difficult for some poets to use this form of rhetoric in their writing. Another idiomatic expression is "*anya adiro gi mnnf*, (your eyes are not good). This simply means that one is not psychologically normal in Igbo usage but it connotes a person with an eye problem in English language.

These translations sound more English than, thereby confirming the thoughts of Sembene Ousmane who states that, "I think that until we have made the African languages part of our educational system in the primary schools and elsewhere, our literature will still be subject to

the control of other powers, or other people's good intentions.”(24) This was later re-echoed by Obi Wali a critic and writer. He says that “Any true African literature must be written in African languages otherwise the writers and their western midwives (critics and publishers) would be merely pursuing a dead end which can only lead to sterility-uncreativity and frustration” (25).

The challenge for African literature is that some writers and critics can no longer interpret the vernacular literature and languages and these writers quickly run to foreign imagery and rhetoric as anchor to their creativity. This development is a serious challenge to both Igbo Literature and African Literature at large.

Igbo Riddles as form of Rhetoric

Igbo Language is rich in riddles and jokes. Traditionally, Igbo riddles are used as popular forms of social interaction and as puzzles that amuse and educate people through the inquisitiveness of their propagator. Igbo riddle is synonymous with Igbo term “*gwain gwam gwam*” (i.e. tell me tell me tell me) or “*’agwugwa*” (i.e. to tell). As a sort of scholarly art, riddles are used to test one's proficiency in learning and acquisition of knowledge. Due to its educative nature, answers that are given to Igbo riddles demand deep thought and confidence of the speaker before they are given. Igbo riddles often exert poetic qualities that demand extra critical abilities or imagination to properly appreciate them. Okonkwo qualifies this by stating that they “sometimes have such impressive literary beauty as found in poems.” (116) Like idioms, Igbo riddles often demand one's search for their meanings outside their content of expression. They could be very metaphorical sometimes as the following riddle shows:

Gwa m gwa m gwa m ihe ji ikpere gazu ubi nna gi Aziza: Ogu
Tel I me Tell me Tell me the thing that walked round your
Father's farm on knees. Answer: Hoe.

In the above expression, hoe is not only metaphorically used but it is personified as walking round the farm. It takes both practical knowledge of farming and exceptional imagination for one to give an accurate answer to this question.

Chukwuma in her study on “the Content and Form of the Igbo Riddle” defines the riddle as “a short verbal form classified along with the proverb as proverb literature” (22-23). She notes that both riddles and proverbs “show fixity of form intolerant of change, but distinguished riddle as being “realized once the meaning is guessed and

the answer given” (24). Despite their peculiar features, some Igbo riddles are anonymously related.

Examples:

Ifeanuru kaegburu, maanughi kaodara(ashishi nkwa)
Ife anuru ka odara, ma anughi ka egburu (ukwa)

What is heard when cut down, but not heard when it fell
(Palm tree chaff)

2. What is heard when it fell, but not heard when cut down
(bread fruit).

The use of parallelism in the above riddles helps to create rhetorical emphasis. Yankson states that “by linguistic parallelism is meant the use of pattern repetition in a literary text for a particular stylistic effect” (14). In the riddle above, “what is heard” is repeated thereby making it a linguistic parallelism.

There are equally some Igbo riddles that came into existence through the secret lore of religious societies, occult groups and masquerade pass words. The riddle “turn turn gem gem” for instance is one of such. The answer is that “oso mgbada bu n'ugwu” (i.e. the antelope's race is on the hill). The riddle above is a magical word used by certain Igbo night masquerades as well as *ulaga* to invoke spiritual powers to perform some extraordinary feats. This power demands the ability to run fast without stopping until the display is over. Another one is: gwamgwamgwam ihe mmuo ji eje mba?

Aziza: utari

Tell me tell me tell me: what the masquerade uses to
travel abroad.

Answer: Cane

The last riddle is exclusively used by the initiates of a masquerade cult.

A set of riddle types which look like lyrics are often chanted by young men and women as Igbo poetic heritage. The chants go in the form of quizzes on different species of animals like:

Solo: Olee anu gbaaji?

Response: Gbaaji
 Solo: Olee anu gbaaji
 Response: Gbaaji
 Ma omini gbaaji, gba
 aji M a ewu gba aj i,
 gba aj i Ma ebunu gba
 aj i, gba aj i Ma ehi
 gba aji, gbaaji.

This chant goes on and on until a mistake of mentioning an animal like the lizard which does not have any hair on its body is made. This mistake ushers the performers into another session of recitation. The translation is as below:

Solo: Which animal grows hair?
 Response: Grows hair
 Solo: Which animal grows hair?
 Response: Grows hair
 Bush rat grows hair, grows hair Goat grows hair,
 grows hair, Ram grows hair, grows hair, Cow
 grows hair, grows hair.

Other riddles go in the form of children's play, especially in the study of the characteristics of animals like in: "which animals have four legs?" They will start naming animals like dog, goat, shrew and antelope. Others equally have to do with sounds made by animals, like the children asking which animals are passing through the farm and another responds that it is a goat. The former urges the animal to cry like it cries, and the child will bleat Kpaa! Kpaa! Kpaa! All these educative processes are various literary means devised by children to understand their world and give meaning to life.

Other Rhetoric Devices in Igbo Traditional Literature

Repetition

Igbo speakers make use of repetition in various ways to achieve different literary purposes in their art of rhetoric. These repetitive devices offer pleasure and mental training to children but are not exploited in the written Igbo Literature due to their fixity of form that is intolerant of change. The rhetoric which makes exclusive use of repetitions in Igbo literature include:

Tongue twisters are literary devices that help the Igbo rhetoricians to learn how to present their speeches in a neat and acceptable manner. The study of tongue twisters is relevant in the study

of phonetics and phonology in modern times. The motive behind the use of tongue twisters is to test how well and fast an Igbo speaker can utter certain sentences and phrases without twisting or ever hurting their tongues. In the course of this exercise, some speakers abruptly break their speech at a point due to their inability to continue speaking. This failure creates an assignment on the side of the speaker who goes home rehearsing this mistake. From the study of these tongue twisters, it is noticed that there is an artistic repetition of certain words in a speech that creates restraints on the part of speakers. Some tongue twisters can run smoothly in the tongue of some speakers while others may trap them. The following examples are some of these tongue twisters:

- 1) Nwaanyi naele olu ele, i naele olu ele ele ka i naeli olu ele eli?
Translation: Woman who sells antelope thigh, do you sell the antelope thigh or do you eat the antelope thigh?

In the above sentence, the repetitions of the words “ele” “olu” “na” and “eli” in close associations create a difficulty in the ability of speakers to freely pronounce them. There are both conduplication and diacope repetitions in this sentence, as the word ele is repeated in various places throughout the speech (i.e. conduplication), and also rhetorically repeated without interruption, with only one or two words between each repeated phrase (i.e. diacope).

- 2) Kwa uka kwa kobo (Every Sunday kobo kobo) The above tongue twister if repeated in chains creates the problem of continuity. There is an anaphora repetition in this tongue twister as the word kwa is repeated at the beginning of every clause in the speech. Kwa is carried up here but this is not possible in the English translation.

Some tongue twisters are determined by their tonal nature and not by their content. This form of rhetoric helps in giving the meaning intended to be conveyed by the speaker.

Example:

- 3) Nwanyị no n'ukwu mgbamgba gbagharia baa mgbamgba mgbā.
 (Woman under the mgbamgba tree run round enter mgbamgba wrestling).

The meaning of “mgbamgba” is not known to the researcher in the above sentence but the onomatopoeic nature of the term makes it meaningful. The next tongue twister contains repetitious of “nza”.

- 4) Gbuo nza boo nza, nyara akpa nza nyaba nza.

(Kill nza share nza, hang the nza bag on neck, hang nza inside).

Epistrophe repetition featured in the above tongue twister as the word 'nza' is repeated at the end of every clause.

Praise Poems

Egudu makes use of the following repetitious in his translations of “Praise Poems” in the text book, *Igbo Traditional Verse*:

Ozo, fulfilled in the cult of Ozo,
Ozo, the blower of the Ozala
Ozo, king, who is the sun tree, (19).

There are both Epanalepis repetitions in “Ozo, fulfilled in the cult of Ozo” and Anadiplosis repetition in lines one and two of the poetry as illustrated below:

Ozo, fulfilled in the cult of Ozo
Ozo, the blower of the ozala. (19)

The use of these repetitions helps to give the praise poem a deep impact of chants/ intonation. This praise of ozo title holder is foregrounded as follows:

I am:
One who tillshills
One who with yams challenge soil
Knife that clears bushes
Barn that is wide
Bush that yields wealth
Bush that is colossal
Bush that is fearful.
Hoe user untouched by hunger (21)

These qualities of ozo are very remarkable as he is hill tiller, +yam farmer, +caterpillar, +bam, +bank, +thickjungle, +dreaded, +contented.

Ozo is also the killer of tigers, king of the wilderness, four Igbo market days (Eke, Orie, Afor, Nkwo) and also Elephant, odo, ogene, and the lyi- tree. (22-24)

Apostrophe

Inanimate objects like hills, earth, sun, valleys, ancestors are not only given life in Egudu's translation of section on “kola- nut” in

invocation poems” but are addressed as if they are present with the speaker:

Hills, take kola- nut
 Earth, take kola nut
 Sun, take kola nut
 Valleys, take kola nut
 Ancestors, take kola nut
 Go before us
 Stand behind us (31)

The rhetoric device used above is common with kola-nut breaking in Igbo custom. The metaphysical content of kola-nut breaking demands the celebration of the living, the dead and the unborn, animate and inanimate things, visible and invisible. The incantations made over the kola-nut before breaking it is a prayer of a sort.

Conclusion

The question of the meaning of life is a complex one. Philosophical and religious speculations have differently propounded theories about the meaning of life but these still leave much to be answered. For instance, what is the purpose of life? Does life have any significance? What really is the meaning of life? From the poetic point of view, life is a mystery expressed in metaphors revealing its meaning in rhetorical words. Writing on the meaning of life, John Hayden states as follows:

Destined to evolve
 To our spiritual nature
 How do we get there
 We're not really sure

Few have walked that road
 And spoke in metaphors
 Revealing life's meaning
 In rhetorical words (Poetry: Meaning of Life)

It is the inquiry into the meaning of life that makes literary artists, especially poets contrive rhetorical devices and forms that help them to define life and make their time meaningful.

Igbo Literary artists may have succeeded in reflecting the proverbial devices in their translated verses, especially in traditional poetry and also in oral/traditional literary poetry but they have not fully utilized the other aspects of Igbo rhetoric of riddles and tongue twisters. This inability might be partially caused by the ignorance of some Igbo artists in using these rhetoric devices for poetry/song performance and

other speech acts. If the rhetoric devices are eventually exploited for song or chant performances, they may still encounter the problem of their inability to change due to their show of fixity of form intolerant of change. Igbo rhetoricians have recognized that the kola nut shares the same quality of Igbo riddles and tongue-twisters in their show of fixity of form intolerant of change, and kola-nuts are never broken in any other language but in Igbo when it is celebrated.

NOTE

*** Epanalepsis is the repetition of the initial word or words of a clause or sentence at the end. Example Ozo, fulfilled in the cult of ozo. Ozo is repeated. For more information on different types of repetition, contact: [http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Repetition\(rhetorical_device\)](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Repetition(rhetorical_device)) * * *

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