

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MASK: IGBO POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND INTERCULTURAL ENGAGEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

By
Uche-Chinemere Nwaozuzu Ph.D

Abstract

This paper seeks to employ the performance metaphor of traditional masking to articulate a method of political engagement between the Igbo and their neighbours in the arena of political leadership in Nigeria. It identifies innate individualism and the lack of group flexibility as the bane to evolving effective political institutions that can challenge other competing culture groups on the same level of mutual respect and cooperation. The paper recommends the ideals of unity founded on the ability to adapt politically to the ever changing landscape of political engagement in Nigeria and suggests the emergence of a strong political hegemony to provide a platform for political engagement in the country.

Introduction

The Igbo of South East Nigeria are one of the three major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. They also have the singular history of a people utterly marginalized and demonized by most of the other federating units. They have been victims of what Alan Buchanan (2002), describes as "discriminatory redistribution", a system in which a group within a sovereign nation face policies that systematically work to their disadvantage. The genesis of this phenomenon though dates back to pre-independence times, was given flip by the misadventure of the civil war which the Igbo lost. Although there has been a lot of programmatic statements and policies geared towards effective reintegration of the Igbo nation into the Nigerian polity, the sceptre of suspicion and envy with which their neighbours hold them still cast a pall of alienation on this significant and vibrant block of the country. This state of affairs appears to have engendered a culture of constant compromise, materialism and what i call second-fiddleism within the political landscape of the country whenever the Igbo are politically defined. This paper draws from the peoples culture to argue that this is not so. It attempts to highlight the fact that beyond the mutual distrust which is the hallmark of association in Nigeria, there is need for the Igbo to rediscover the true essence of political leadership found in their culture and engage themselves first; and then, the other geopolitical zones on the platform of equality, sincerity and fairness in the pursuit of the Nigerian project. Before we go along with our analysis, it is important to state that most of the views that we shall advance here are tentative deductions that may still be subjected to the efficacies of empirical sociological and cultural research to test their validity. Be that as it may, there are quite significant traces of observable and experiential evidence in a good number of the conclusions garnered in this paper.

We shall begin my essay by painting the portrait of a performance, a celebration among political leaders of different climes in Nigeria. This should not be surprising because as M. J.C. Echeruo (3) avers, "ceremony is at the very heart of culture...and true culture is represented in those details of communal behaviour which are added to pure function" I shall

Nwabueze's play opens with a flurry of activities in the market place. Movement one of the play presents women immersed in the dim of commerce and intra-personal communication.

Evening. The scene opens in Orié market. The women (emphasis mine) are packing their wares in readiness to close for the day. They perform some folkloristic songs as they pack their wares. The songs are designed to demonstrate their attitudes to themselves and society at large (5).

Like Elesin, Ekwedike the village griot punctures this ebullient atmosphere of trading and eulogizes the women,

My beautiful ones. The ones that gave honour to our ancestral land (laughs) They say that the snake will always give birth to something that resembles it (Pauses) My beautiful ones, seeing you here at the historical market makes me remember Adaugo Nwanyeruwa, the daughter of Ojim. Nwanyeruwa, the Valliant's jaw that grows grey beards. Nwanyeruwa, the mighty man-woman who led the Aba women in an uprising that shook the Colonial Administration (6).

Ekwedike in these words of praise draws a parallel between the women's sense of responsibility and achievement and that of their forebears who were also market women. He tries to recapture the essence of the market place which served as the platform for the women's gatherings that conceived the rebellion against oppressive colonial laws. In fact in the play there is a graphic portrayal of the link between the economic and political energy of the contemporary women and the colonial market women led by Adaugo Nwanyeruwa. The playwright brings this design vividly to the reader-audience by transporting us to the market place of the colonial era superintended by Adaugo. In the very first encounter we witness a consummate meeting of women in the market place to articulate the important social issue of colonial taxation,

Women of my ancestral land, there is dust in the air. Evil men have enveloped our land. The name of that evil, that dust is government. We have heard different rumours about what the government is doing and even what it intends to do. Our husband's have heard it, our children have heard it, even the trees of our land have heard it. The serene atmosphere of this village will soon be disrupted by the strangers in our midst who call themselves government. If we go to the market (emphasis mine) it is government, if we cough, it is government. Women of Ngwaland, shall we escape into the ant-hole because of government? (18)

Apart from exhibiting a high sense of responsibility and radicalism, the location of this women's gathering is quite instructive. The market place as we highlighted earlier provides the avenue for meeting and sharing of information that affects the community. Nwabueze in this play presents a group of women who are empowered to the extent of articulating an important issue that threatens the fabric of their society. By making the contemporary women in the first scene experience the social vision of their forebears in Adaugo and

her followers, the playwrights achieves a remarkable success of tracing the tradition of group identity and empowerment as occasioned by traditional female mercantilism and drive.

Beyond the normal image of a chorus, and characters of embellishment who indulge in excessive singing and dancing to the delight of the men folks, the women in these markets are presented as individuals involved in the serious matter of commerce, exchange of goods and ideas and information. Their dialogue suggests this much,

Adaugo: We shall not allow ourselves to be harassed unnecessarily. I have heard that in

their own country women are highly respected. But when they come here, they treat us like ash that must be dissipated for the next meal to come. Shall we allow ourselves to be treated like ash?

Women: No!

Adaugo: My sisters, we shall not allow ourselves to be taxed. We shall resist any attempt to harass us. We shall put things in order... our men look weakly and do nothing. We should not be afraid to fight. The earthworm has neither a knife nor a hoe, but it pierces the earth with its stomach. We must resist the government. And if they come after us, we must fight back. (19).

In addition to the radical rhetoric exhibited by Adaugo in the lines above we distil a character imbued with self confidence and vision which are fitting traits of an empowered individual. Despite her lack of Western education, she understands the dynamics of the skewed relationship between the ruled and the rulers, between the colonial government and the colonised peoples hence her retort, "I have heard that in their own country women are highly respected. But when they come here, they treat us like ash that must be dissipated for the next meal". Adaugo clearly gives us a glimpse into the state of the women folk in traditional society before the advent of Western influence. In these lines she seems to suggest that the African women had some modicum of social and economic empowerment which was completely eroded by Western male oriented culture.

The market women in *The Dragon's Funeral* are not mere appendages and foil for their men folks. Adaugo Nwayeruwa like Iyaloja commands critical and artistic space in the play till the very end. In fact the resolution of the conflict in both plays is predicated significantly on the knowing contribution and vision of the women folk. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Iyaloja berates Elesin for abdicating his responsibly thereby endangering cosmic harmony and wellbeing of his people. By the same token, Adaugo lampoons the colonial officials and their local collaborators like Nduka, for daring to inflict more hardship and suffering on the people. These women present the image of individuals who are empowered within the universe of their communities. They are leaders in their respective markets. And it would appear that their delineation as leaders speaks eloquently as to the level of confidence and power which they wield.

strive towards becoming key players rather than negotiating for settlement and political crumbs.

With regards to intercultural communication, Larry Samovar et al.(2010) argues that it occurs when a member of one culture produces a message for consumption by a member of another culture. Elsewhere, Greenface, (2009) shows that this phenomenon can also occur within a seemingly heterogeneous culture group with numerous dialectal and minor cultural differences of which the Igbo and indeed other ethnic groups in Nigeria are good examples. Inherent in our definition of intercultural communication is the fact that man is a symbol making creature. In human communication, a symbol is an expression that stands for or represents something else. One key characteristic of symbols, and one that must be kept in mind here, is that symbols bear no inherent relation to what they are intended to represent and are therefore arbitrary. They are only tokens which human beings employ in their relation with their fellows, in their attempt to share the reality of their existence with others. Extending this feature to political engagement among culture groups, we evince the fact that those mores and collective values that define political culture or inclination is in state of constant flux and shifting signification often determined by circumstance and group preservation. We have alluded to this when we talked about the two faced nature of political engagement in Nigeria. The point being made here is that in the context of intercultural engagement, what we may consider as absolutes in a culture group are often arbitrary and should be approached with the hindsight of caution and knowledge.

As we highlighted earlier, intercultural communication is not a new phenomenon. Since the dawn of human history when the first humans formed tribal groups, intercultural contact manifested whenever people from one tribe encountered people from another tribe and discovered that they were different. Sometimes these differences, in the absence of multicultural awareness and tolerance, elicited the human propensity to respond malevolently. However in the pursuits of political alliances, knowledge, or economic interest, these differences were more often recognized and accommodated. For instance, Alexander the Great was known to pay homage to the different gods of the lands he conquered and to encourage his followers to marry into powerful and influential families of their host community. Having given a brief insight into the dual concepts of culture and intercultural communication, we shall proceed to examine our idea of Igbo intercultural engagement. Given the opinions expressed above on intercultural communication, it becomes evident that it could happen on two levels; viz; within a culture (that is among its various sub-groups of dialectal and cultural variants and between a culture group and another. For purposes of convenience here we will term these; internal and external intercultural engagement. It is in the understanding of this dynamic nature of communication that we would first examine intercultural engagement among the Igbo before extending it to the Igbo and other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria.

Our hypothetical assumptions here are predicated on the five fundamental features that have marked Igbo association among themselves and their participation in Nigerian politics. These five features which are highlighted below, have tended to define and engage the attitude and personality of the Igbo in their dealings amongst themselves and with other ethnic nationalities.

First, there is this erroneous assumption among us that the Igbo stock is perhaps smarter than other competing major nationalities (A carry over from the Igbo leading light in the field of commerce and self development)

Secondly, the unhealthy rivalry which has formed the spine of political association among Igbo Political leadership and the proclivity for the Igbo to discriminate between the backward and wicked; the not to be trusted and the prime amongst various Igbo sub groups.

Thirdly, the skewed nature of political association in Nigeria occasioned by fewer number of states, local government areas which has in turn translated to less representation in the national government.

Fourthly, the easy acceptability and adoption of politico-cultural norms and mores found among other major nationalities as popular fads and ideals by the Igbo, jettisoning their own cultural identity. We find this in dressing, slangs and inordinate worship of the man with wealth without asking question how it has been got. A near political monarchy or absolutism alien to the Igbo world view

Finally, a Post-liberalist philosophy which places more premium on the individual than the community. Hence, the success of the individual is celebrated and cast as models for the youths rather than collective good despite the fact that most times, the single individual rose to the ranks on the blighted exploitation of the community and in fact in most cases sold the communal good in his quest to attain personal and family visibility

The road map to Igbo internal cultural engagement one makes bold to say begins with education formal and informal, personal and collective. We have chosen to present this dual design to mitigate the agitations of critics who may see my thesis as merely academic and perhaps farfetched. It projects a scheme which has to begin with a restoration of individual cultural identity and cultural pride before it becomes communal and collective. Of course there is no losing sight of the fact that it would not be a soft solution because it is all about the contest for limited want, limited space and limited sphere of influence. And most of those leaders benefitting from the individualist and neo liberalists Nigerian political set up would fight to maintain the status quo, attempt to suggest that this kind of re-education internal cultural engagement are mere gimmicks and talk shows.

For internal cultural communication, we propose for instance a method of cultural engagement with ourselves so as to show that the man from Nnewi or Mbaise is not more materialist than the man from Nsukka or Oguta, that the Igbo from Abakaliki or Okigwe is not less intellectually endowed than the Igbo from Owerri or Awka. This is the first level of intercultural education and communication. In fact, Ben Nwabueze's view below highlights the urgency to chart this path of cultural engagement and self re-education among the Igbo in their political dealings with each other. He observes that in participating in Nigerian politics,

The Igbo thus come to the politics of modern Nigeria with some inbred propensity for intra-group quarrelsomeness. Within the group, unless you are able to get them into one political party, partisan politics of the modern Nigerian state is, in the tradition of that of the traditional community, approached in the spirit of a feud, which is fought with vehemence, with no quarters given on either side(263).

crops, lots of daughters, who bring in in-laws and presents and many wealthy and influential sons (1995:31). The views above by Amadiume, goes to show that women in most traditional African society were well off in terms of material acquisition. The nomenclature “petty trading” today is seen as the preserve of the women folks, and no longer the serious affair of commerce conducted with every manner of traditional decorum. It is important to note that the male characters in the plays examined in this paper relate with their women with a knowing mien of respect and recognition. Their views formed significant platforms in the understanding and resolution of the conflict in the plays. Unlike their men folks, they emerged the opposing forces and emerged as heroes and conscience of the society.

Commenting on the fact that Soyinka “wears many hats”, James Gibbs observes that his hope as an interpreter of the Nigerian dramatist’s works is to highlight that even within the diversity and versatility of his creation as a writer and his involvements as an activist, “the reader will feel the current of a life which is not pursuing different courses separated by islands and ideas and delta flats, but a strong river full of eddies and subtle flows, but one stream, one river, one flow” (1981:3). We can apply this creative image of Soyinka to his metaphoric use of the market and the women in *Death and the King’s Horseman*. One may need to go beyond the facial reading of the play, as well as situate it within the purview of tradition to fully appreciate the significance of the female characters and the market as a social institution. It is also in this sense that the semantic anomaly with which we associate a metaphoric design can be fully grasped. By the same token, I have pointed out elsewhere that Emeka Nwabueze could be considered as a reflective thinker as his self awareness and consciousness has led him into the process of thinking about art and society in a constructive manner. This scholarly preoccupation probably has led him towards unmasking pretensions, becoming aware of his culture and history thus accelerating the process of self and collective consciousness (2011:12). This awareness finds rich and vivid reality in the market women led by Adaugo. It is a consciousness which empowers these women politically to confront the forces of oppression and triumph at the end. Gayle Austin writes that,

There is now a growing body of feminist literary criticism of plays. Some of this is first stage “image of women” criticism, which points out patterns in writing by men in which, for example, the female characters suffer or die in order for the male characters to grow or continue on their life journeys. Other, second-stage criticism focuses on patterns in women’s writing such as repressed fears and anger expressed through coded plot lines and character types. Third-stage theory-centered work tends to focus on language itself and the connections or lack thereof between words and reality (1990:21).

We can appropriate Austin’s classification above and situate our critical effort between the first and second schools of criticism. The market women in the plays analysed in this paper are modelled on the habitués of women staking their lives for their men folks and indeed the entire community. By the same token, these heroic attribute is given vent in the coded language of the women which allowed us examine the metaphoric nature of their

market setting and the symbolism it provides in understanding the ideals of gender empowerment in traditional society.

In conclusion, we advance the view that what the portrayal of women in the plays we examined in this paper suggests is that women exhibit a significant level of empowerment in most traditional societies in Nigeria. Using the market as a critical kaleidoscope we have tried to highlight the various tokens of activities which one can associate with an empowered group to stress and elucidate our point. Thus we can conclude that the three plays of Soyinka, Nwabueze and Bakare examined here, are fitting representatives of the significance of the market as an institution in the traditional society and the place of women in it.

Works Cited

- Amadiume, Ifi. *Male Daughter, Female Sons: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Books, Ltd., 1995.
- Aristophanes. "Thesmophoriazusaë". In *The Complete Plays of Aristophanes*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2006.
- Austin, Gayle. *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1990.
- Bakare, Ojo Rasaki. *The Gods and the Scavengers*. Abuja: Roots Books and Journals Nigerian Limited, 2006.
- Bauer, Peter.T. *West African Trade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954.
- Ford, D. And G.I.Jones. *Igbo and Ibibio Speaking Peoples of South Eastern Nigeria*. London: Oxford University Press, 1950.
- Gibbs, James, ed. *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*. London: Heinemann, 1981.
- Hodder, B.W. *Origin of Traditional Markets in Africa South of the Sahara*. Edinburgh: Centre for African Studies, University of Edinburgh, 1965.
- Jeyifo, Biodun. *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Nwabueze, Emeka. *The Dragon's Funeral*. Enugu: ABIC Books, 2005.
- Nwaozuzu, Uche-Chinemere. "Introduction" *Theatre and New Horizons: Selected Essays on Emeka Nwabueze*. Enugu: ABIC Books, 2011.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Death and the King's Horseman*. London: Methuen, 1975.
- Ukwu I. Ukwu and B.W. Hodder. *Market in West Africa*. Ibadan: University Press, 1969.

The Igbo perceive themselves as citizens of the world, and are imbued with a sense of fraternity with all other Africans. There is need therefore for us to rethink our tactics for co-existing with other Nigerians. There is need in particular to abandon the inclination to despise or look down on others not as successful or clever as ourselves. We must learn less abrasiveness, more shrewdness and tact and willingness to grant the validity of less Igbo boisterous values.

By the same token Achebe (1998) admonishes
The degree of travesty to which the Igbo man is apparently ready to reduce his institutions in his eagerness "to get up" can be truly amazing. At first sight this weakness might appear only as a private problem for the Igbo themselves. But an indifference to non material values which it portrays might easily spill over into a carelessness and a disregard for the feelings of sacredness which others might hold their own institutions.

The only exordia we add to these wise counsels, is before the Igbo begin this new engagement with outsiders, they should first employ it among themselves. In the spirit of group-cooperation, non-judgemental and cultural reawakening, they should begin a re-education process, anchored in key social institutions like the church, schools and markets etcetera. We shall conclude by prescribing the examples such as the Ahiajoku lecture series by the Government of Imo state and the Anambra state Government that we are told, sets aside a day in the week to conduct government business in Igbo as fitting models. Our performance ends with a curtain call that beacons on all true Igbo political leaders and intellectuals to see the urgent need to evolve a strong political structure that would withstand the tyranny of marginalization, internal bickering and double dealing in the theatre of Nigerian political intrigues and power struggle and in the process contribute their legitimate own quota to the growth of a strong united and democratic Nigeria.

References

- Achebe, Chinua (1998). *The Trouble With Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- Arnold, Matthew (1960). *Culture and Anarchy*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Buchanan, Alan (2002). "Secession and Nationalism", in Loius Pojaman, *Political Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. New York: MacGraw-Hill Inc.
- Echeruo, Micheal (1979). "A Matter of Identity". Ahiajoku Lecture
- Gramsci, Antonio (1971). *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Nwabueze, Ben (1985). "The Igbo in The Context of Modern Government and Politics in Nigeria: A Call for Self-Examination and Self-Correction". Ahiajoku Lecture
- Obiezuofu-Ezeigbo, Edmund (2007). *The Biafran War and The Igbo In Contemporary Nigerian Politics*. Lagos: Genius Press.

- Pojaman, Louis (2002) *Political Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. New York: MacGraw-Hill Inc.
- Samovar, Larry, Richard E. Porter and Edwin R. McDaniel (2010). *Communication Between Cultures*. Boston: Wadsworth Press.
- Storey, John (2009). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 5th ed. London: Pearson Longman.
- Williams, Raymond (2009). "The Analysis of Culture", in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 4th ed. John Storey ed. Harlow: Pearson Education.