

**LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD: RE-EVALUATION
OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND
TECHNOLOGY IN RESPONSE TO 21ST CENTURY
CHALLENGES. PERSPECTIVES FROM J.P. CLARK'S
*OZIDI***

¹Omeje, Oguejiofor V and ²Ezeugwu, Cindy Anene

1. Humanities Unit, School of General Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

2. Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Email: cindy.ezeugwu@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper evaluates the ideology of Indigenous Knowledge and Technology (IKT) in Nigeria as an African cosmology. The younger generation is bereft of the potency of IKT because the colonialists termed her IKT practices unscientific. Thus, the development of IKTs to the advanced and exporting stage may have needed to be improved by colonialism and its allies - mainly foreign religions in contemporary Nigeria. Studies show that there are prospects of growing IKTs such as artificial intelligence, bullet and fireproofs, ethnographic medicines, orthopaedics, weaving, iron-smelting and pottery. J.P. Clark's play- *Ozidi* used this fact by portraying *witchcraft* for self-defence and warfare. These inchoate IKTs are indices that Nigeria has all it takes to become a global technological giant if not for some colonial resentments. The apparent failure of modern scientific technologies to solve rising global challenges such as hunger, poverty, sickness, terrorism and general security has intensified the demand for African IKTs as alternatives. Adopting historical/ textual analytical design, the study explores the possibilities and prospects inherent in African IKT. The paper aims to buttress the aptitudes of IKTs for sustainable development and growth. It concludes that given the cost-effectiveness and safety of African IKTs in Nigeria, the phenomenon should be given a pride of place by incorporating it

into the Nigerian educational system to help theorise, modernise and remove unnecessary ritualistic encumbrances to enable it to compete viably, with other global technologies for practical and scientific purposes other than mere aesthetics which many people assume are ritualistic in nature.

Keywords: Africa, Indigenous Knowledge, Technology, Craft, Development, J.P Clark.

Introduction

Before colonial times in Africa, Indigenous knowledge and technology, hereafter referred to as ITK, was one of the most patronised arts in Nigeria. This is a result of its evaluability and indispensability in society. The ITKs are known to perform diverse functions, including but not limited to orthopaedics, artificial intelligence, bullet and fireproofs, ethnographic medicines, weaving, iron-smelting and pottery, among others. To this end, practitioners of ITK were held in high esteem, and IKT was one of the veritable tools for propagating African indigenous technology. Consequently, more practitioners were often being incorporated into the trade to reach out to more people needing one service or the other. During that era, the practitioners were known to impact society positively without religious or colonial interference. However, it is deplorable to note that the period when IKTs prospered and were highly valued has vanished and is now replaced by the lacklustre attitude of modern times. More worrisome is that Africans, supposed to be transmitters of our cultural values to posterity, regrettably take sides with Western technology they religiously follow. This act of notoriety portends the demise of Nigeria's robust IKTs in the 21st century. Thus, the dwindling state of acceptance and patronage of IKTs is fast relegating it to the dustbin of history if something is not done quickly to address the

menace. This can be done by decolonising the minds of Nigerians to awaken their consciousness and stand up against this ugly trend.

In light of the above, the choice of *Ozidi* for this study is informed by the period the play was set in Ijaw- one of the over two hundred ethnic tribes that existed before the colonisation of Nigeria began in the early 19th century; when the colonialists started introducing western democracy, alongside the formation of modern city-states in Africa. The storyteller in *Ozidi*, assuming an omniscient narrator, confirms the above information thus: "...perhaps, you think this is a quaint custom that we are propping up cobwebs that we ought to sweep clean out of the house with broom and brush. Well ...aren't we living in a free democratic country?" (1-2). This shows that the prehistoric Ijaw custom about to be re-enacted has been abandoned over the years, hence the 'quaint custom' probably due to colonisation. Elaborating on this new development, the storyteller mentioned the newly created city-states like "Lagos, Ibadan, Enugu and Kaduna where the Ijaws move in droves in search of wealth (big money) – these towns in the days of their (Ijaw) forefathers, where not bigger than mere cattle market" (4). *Ozidi* is probably one of the few literalised aesthetic displays in dramatic form that demonstrates just an aspect of a vast body of knowledge- indigenous knowledge and technology designated by the colonising culture as witchcraft. The term 'craft' is of utmost interest to the researchers, corresponding to skill. Thus, witchcraft or wizardry is positively used to qualify one with exceptional professional talent. Therefore, we are often inundated with terms like computer, literary, mathematical wizard or wizard of law, and so on. Arising from the above, the researchers are compelled to ask, 'When then has witchcraft hence, wizardry becomes a derogatory form of expressing competence of one's profession'?

Perspectives on Indigenous Knowledge and Technology (IKT)

Indigenous knowledge is a body of knowledge developed within a person or group of people before the advent of the modern scientific knowledge system. In the words of Senanayake S.G.J.N, “it encompasses many areas of importance to the society like security, agriculture, eco-system and so on. It is variously known in different parlance as local knowledge, peoples’ knowledge, traditional science or wisdom” (87). These names go a long way to buttress the idea of indigenous information, skill, and application for development; they give clues to the operational and characterising ideas of what is and how it is developed within a given cultural area. The difference between indigenous knowledge and technology and modern scientific knowledge lies in the fact that the latter is a product of higher institutions of learning – universities and research institutes while the former is generated orally and transmitted from generation to generation (Tharakan; 2017, Ugboma:2014, and Senanayake: 2006).

Indigenous knowledge and technology are empirically grounded, while modern scientific understanding is theoretically grounded. Analysis of indigenous knowledge and technology raises the question of appropriate technologies that a given community deems fit to satisfy its need. *Ozidi* focuses on warfare and the security needs of the Ijaw people at the time; within the precolonial era, fear was the primary agent of societal destabilisation. An influential person or community often becomes a threat to its neighbour. In addition, wild animals, natural disasters, hunger and diseases were significant threats at the time. All these threats were controlled through various indigenous knowledge and technology.

With other IKTs that existed long before independence, there were high hopes that Nigeria would soon become a technological giant beyond the shores of Africa with the creation of such IKTs like Kwagh-Hir puppet Theatre in Tiv, Benue State, Fire and

Bulletproof exhibition and Sango theatrical performances in South West, 'Wonder' masquerade theatrical performance in Enugu State, South East (a crane-like technology manipulated to oscillate masquerades to unimaginable heights, though it is not intended to lift objects as cranes do). Furthermore, there is the control and manipulation of natural forces by the Ijaws of the Niger Delta in the South-South region of Nigeria, as seen in J.P. Clark's *Ozidi*. IKTs can also be found in Orthopedics (bone setting techniques), Medicine (herbs), Weaving, Iron smelting, Pottery, Food and Wine processing and Agriculture. It is important to note that all the IKTs are not domiciled only in one locality or state. On the contrary, as Senanayake avers, "they can be found in diverse forms in every tribe in Nigeria; either as a different knowledge of similar things, a different knowledge of different things, different ways of organising knowledge or different ways of perceiving and transferring knowledge" (46).

By independence, it was assumed that Nigeria had extricated herself from all forms of economic, political, social, cultural and religious censorship by the colonisers. Nigeria could now chart her developmental course without the interference of any document from the West. With these high hopes and aspirations, writers like Clark, Achebe, Soyinka, Rotimi and others were optimistic that within a short period in Nigeria, there would be a harvest of technological breakthroughs, knowing the level of attainment already in existence in the country. This dream was so evident that Soyinka concluded that Nigeria had arrived, compared to her African counterparts. But Soyinka soon realised and lamented these aliens' inimical nature and attitude towards African cultures' innovative and creative roots, which caused a tremendous loss of African skills (xvii). Chinua Achebe submits that "during the early years of Nigeria's independence, high hopes of rapid developments was evidenced as a declaration of ambition to become an advanced nation preferably by the year 2020 was made" (9). By this

declaration, Nigeria is expected to be among the comity of world powers within forty years of independence in 1960. Apart from oil wealth and Agricultural products, what assured Nigeria of greatness is her reliability on IKTs.

But, while Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal laments the reduction of African IKTs as mere myth, Areole Oyebola insists that;

black people need an absolute legend translated into concrete achievement in science and technology, industrialisation and military strength, not a tale of futility and irrelevance, characterised by profuse displays of ritual and bare-breasted dances during national entertainment international shows. In the series of coups that snowballed into a civil war (119).

Oyebola further laments that “Nigeria missed a unique chance in history to tap the resources of her local geniuses after the civil war” (120). Nigeria did not use the experience and creative talents of men and women of the Research and production institute, who, during the civil war in desperation, produced Nigeria’s first rocket from rusty milk pipes. Thus, Nigeria was progressing rather towards Senghor’s vision of achievement. Nigeria was generally believed to be enveloped by an assurance of endless possibilities of unbridled destiny and overwhelming excitement about life determination uninhibited by any knowledge of providence. There was untainted optimism about Nigeria achieving this greatness in every sphere of human endeavour compared to Ghana. It is on the bases of Oyebola’s lamentation that the researchers stand to insist that while the chances for achieving this greatness are still rife, the old inferiority attitude, the lack of self-confidence to reach the goal, religious interference, ethnic politics and corruption have continued to militate against the lofty IKT advancement in contemporary Nigeria.

An Overview of Indigenous Knowledge and Technology in the Pre-Colonial Era

Oyebola stated that “the level of IKTs from the pre-colonial era was very high that before the civil war ended in 1970, Nigeria scientists were known to be improving on their design for the production of a ten-mile rocket” (119). During the war, it is on record that the Biafran side invented nearly a five thousand feet range anti-aircraft rocket. Within the restriction of the war, Nigeria also invented explosives, beer, and batteries, among others (119). It shall be noted that Nigerian ingenuity to produce all these technologies were not developed within just seven years – from 1960 of independence to 1967, when the civil war broke out, and up to 1970 when the war ended. In other words, craftsmanship in Nigeria started long before the independence without the aid of the colonising agents.

Confirming that there are un-methodized scientific trappings in many African indigenous therapeutic, herbal or medicinal practices, Ola, Oloidi notes that “all instruments or infrastructure for existence and development were already in place before colonisation” (34). This means that Europeans did not bring new ideas but new methods or approaches to improve existing ones. Oloidi noted, “Apart from these modern pure sciences that are very foreign to African or Nigerian indigenous traditions, all modern disciplines in the universities or colleges are directly or indirectly made operational from the people’s local traditions” (34).

Aware of these potentials since 1949 in Nigeria, Zik decrying the ‘logic of imperialism’ buttressed by a false belief about the incapacity of the colonised Nigerians to develop initiative, declared that “... it is our considered opinion that factors of capitalism and imperialism have stultified the normal growth of Nigeria” (159). Confirming Zik’s view, Margaret Ugboma believes that “Zik’s position about the logic of imperialism and its effect on the

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colonised to develop initiative is true considering that IKTs have not been given the rightful position in development initiatives” (14).

Zik’s declaration was motivated by the potential wealth in vast human and natural resources like gold, coal, tin, iron ore, tantalite, lead, diatomite, uranium, and lignite, among others; a great majority of Nigerians still live in abject want. Zik continued to criticise imperialism as;

A crime against humanity because it enables any section of the human race which is armed with the techniques of modern scientific knowledge without justification to dominate a less fortunate area of society, simply because the latter are unequal to the task of resisting the force and which buttresses such domination (158).

Zik’s view about imperialism above shows that the relevance and potency of ITK in Nigeria, as in many other African countries, were largely suppressed by the Europeans in the bid to promote their technologies. We shall investigate the efficacy and manifestations of ITKs in the study text.

Synopsis of *Ozidi*

Ozidi is an encounter with a group of practitioners in witchcraft. They displayed the knowledge of the craft mainly for self-defence, warfare and general security purposes.

The people of Orua – an imaginary kingdom in Ijaw, in the Niger Delta area of the present South Southern Nigeria are about to crown their new idiot King. A human head is needed to cleanse the throne, but the people of Orua do not deem such sacrifice fit for their silly king. But seeing it as a task that must be accomplished, they conspired against the King’s only brother, a warrior called Ozidi and killed him. This sets the pace for the first encounter with the IKTs in the play.

Manifestations of Indigenous Knowledge and Technologies in J P Clark's *Ozidi*

The challenge with most IKTs as can be seen from *Ozidi* is that they existed in mythical and ritual forms. That is, they are shrouded in rituals, mysticism and esotericism; but their values cannot be overestimated because as we shall soon see, there is every likelihood that modern technologies evolved from such myths. Indigenous knowledge here means the know-how for the production and control or manipulation of various devices otherwise known as charms for various purposes. Some of these devices and their uses as found in *Ozidi* include: -

Bulletproof (*Odeshi*). This is a charm that protects an individual from any object that can inflict physical wounds such as tearing or cutting of the flesh. It could be a charm worn over the body or it could be conjured or injected into the body as immunity against bullets, machet cuts, stones or any harmful object. In the play *Ozidi*, Oreame took Ozidi - her grandson - to Bouakarakabiri to invest bulletproof charm for him. Even though Oreame also knows the full recipe of the charm, she would not do it on her grandson for an Ijaw adage has it that 'the housewife often has no stomach for her broth' (*Ozidi*,44). This means that no physician can successfully cure himself.

When Ozidi was ready for the headhunt, we learnt from the stage directions of the play that he fortified himself with his battledress - 'a brief white skirt mounted with bells and cowries and cap flying seven feathers of the eagle (*Ozidi*, 21). This attire may look simple or weird but it is vested with Bulletproof (*Odeshi*) an indigenous/local protective charm/mechanism.

The conspirators know that Ozidi is so protected, thus, their leader Ofe gives the following instructions to his men that the only way

open to get rid of Ozidi is to beat him till he dies. So he confirms the potency of the charm thus:

OFE: For remember that bullet in contact with the man turn to water, spears splint off him; and do not let it stick in your eyes that not only do blades go blunt on his skin but arrows bounce off his body (*Ozidi*, 22).

They waylay Ozidi, and pummel him with clubs and fists until he dies, but the problem is that no cutlass could cut his skin whether dead or alive unless the secret of the indigenous knowledge to soften his body is revealed. This they got through Ozidi's wife before his head could be severed from his body.

Ballistic Missile/Drone

On several occasions, Oreame sends thunderbolts to destroy her targets. For example, when Azezebaife was set to fight, Oreame takes Ozidi to the shrine where she made prayers to *Ayi Oyin Tamara* for guidance, protection and victory for Ozidi, this results, according to the stage direction, "to a sudden clap of thunder which breaks across the clear morning sky. As Oreame hears it, she performs certain rituals in form of homage to the thunder by touching the ground with her forehead and with thrown arms ..."(*Ozidi*, 76). That is not all as Ozidi is about to engage Ofe in another battle, we read that: "Three sharp claps of thunder break suddenly overhead, racing one another across the sky. All wince visibly, but the effect upon Oreame was like a bell to action" (*Ozidi*, 87). The implication of this is that Oreame has the indigenous knowledge that could deploy Thunderbolt for specific purposes. Immediately Oreame receives a signal from the thunder, she prompts Ozidi to attack and kill Ofe. Another incident that points to Oreame's power to control thunder is that after Ozidi

killed Tebesonoma, Oreame feels that Tebesonoma's sister and her little child would be a threat to Ozidi in future. So Oreame takes Ozidi to Tebesonoma's sister's house. Her husband Agonosin had gone to the bush to attend to his fish pond. Before the woman and her son died, Oreame had sent thunder to kill Agonosin in the bush; and a neighbour narrates what happened thus:

Neighbour: A terrible thing has happened! A terrible thing! Out of the clear sky fell a thunderbolt at one stroke, it ploughed a path, all the way to where Agonosin stood by a point, moving him down to earth. If you'll come out, all the bush is burning about him and not the entire town bearing pots of water can put out the fire (*Ozidi*,105-106).

In modern science, a rocket or missile has a launching ground from where the projectile takes off; but in this case, Oreame uses a magical hand fan as a launching pad for the thunder; though, it is not that she puts the missile on the magic fan before igniting it. The magic fan is already configured to activate any purpose it is meant to achieve. As their common weapons of warfare, Azema carries a crown of violence on her hands (*Ozidi*,112), and Oreame carries a thunderbolt in the hollow of her hands too (*Ozidi*,113).

Special Fan

The special magic fan used by Oreame is a multi-purpose device. It is used as a source of energy to affect the strength flow of a person or thing. For example, when Ozidi is too weak to engage in a fight, Oreame beats him lightly but briskly all over the body with the special fan. This action energises him and spurs him to fight (*Ozidi*, 77 and 105).

At other times, it is used to: - stir up the wind (p. 79), neutralize Ofe's disappearing acts mechanism (p. 86), dry up the water in Ozidi's dream (p. 92) and other spiritual effects.

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence should not be viewed in this sense as a machine. The notion of a machine invokes the idea of modernity. Artificial intelligence should be seen as any device that has the ability or power to perceive its environment and can take the necessary actions required of it with little or no human effort. For instance, it can perceive a threat within a given location or environment and maximize or repel it successfully. Oreame has a mirror which serves as a camera that can pick up and send pictorial information to her. At a point when Ofe wanted to avoid directly engaging Oreame and Ozidi in a duel, he employs every strategy including feigning cold; but Ewari reminds him that Oreame will not believe that because she sees everything in that mirror glass (*Ozidi*, 82). Sometimes, through its rays which serve as infrared light, Oreame injects, induces or feeds her enemy with poisonous substance in form of magical food; as she did to Ofe (*Ozidi*,87) and Tebesonoma (*Ozidi*,100-101). This weakens the enemy and renders him susceptible to defeat. With this mirror, Oreame sees when Ozidi is in trouble and subsequently makes an appearance on the scene.

Aero Dynamics

In the opening scene in the public square where Ozidi and Azeabife are interlocked in mortal combat, drumsticks are left suspended in mid-air (*Ozidi*,78) and Oreame is sighted scurrying in the clouds as she monitors the atmosphere of war preparation in Ofe's compound.

Aerial Trapping Device

Seeing that Oreame can also fly in the air, Sigirisi develops special net technology with which to capture her (*Ozidi*, 83-84). Though he succeeds in enwrapping Oreame with the net midair, it is of no effect for no sooner had the net hung over Oreame than she shook her shoulders and the net fell off her.

Transfixing Devices

Oreame uses special IKTs to transfix people, thereby demobilising them. She applies it to the old wizard Bouakurakarabiri (*Ozidi*, 43) and Tebesonoma (*Ozidi*, 99).

Disappearing Acts

This indigenous knowledge is often used by Ofé (*Ozidi*, 86) to escape being captured but Oreame has it too. She uses it to perform espionage, leading to the successful digging up of Ofé's protective pot of herbs buried in his garden (85). In addition to the act of disappearance is that Oreame has the art of turning into a tsetse fly (113) or any other creature at will. Alfred Alex. Anedo posits that this charm sometimes affects the "ability to vacate or remove the user from the scene of danger unhurt. Not only does it assure the user of safety, but also saves him from being trapped by sending the person far away from danger zone irrespective of the suddenness or swiftness of the incident" (39).

From the foregoing discourse therefore, one can agree with Oloidi that "nearly all the disciplines or courses taught in colleges and universities were, and are still popularly or informally represented or practised..."(32). He listed among other disciplines, Medicine, Engineering and so on, of which, we have sieved from *Ozidi*. It is worth noting that even the acclaimed Western technological advancement started in this mythical form. Advancing on this, Segla Dafon Aime, while encouraging Africans to follow the example of what took place in the West, in the days

Omeje and Ezeugwu: Looking Back to Move Forward: Re-Evaluation of African... of Renaissance and the Enlightenment, insists that Africa “must maximize the myths yet at the same time, start with the said myths, extract from the intuitive, tacit and implicit knowledge for analytical and speculative study given establishing the foundation for innovation and modern development” (32).

There is no gainsaying that Africa, especially Nigeria has a lot of innovative acumen emanating from her indigenous knowledge and technological myths and the proof, that such innovative skills abound in Nigeria is part of the 21st Century challenges which this paper showcases. Moving away from *Ozidi*, IKTs are currently in vogue despite the campaign against the practice. In Igboeze South Local Government of Enugu state, in Nigeria, it is a common practice to invoke the *Ube* deity to recover stolen items and subsequently punish the offender through (induced suicide by hanging). If these acts were inactive, people would have abandoned them long ago. Before we conclude this paper, we must refer to the three most recent incidents bordering on African IKTs within the last quarter of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021 in Uwasota town in Edo and Ogwashi Uku town in Delta state; both are in South Southern states of Nigeria. The third incident is in the Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu state. These references will show how important it is that in-depth research is done in the field of African IKTs for it to achieve global visibility and deployment for the solution of humanitarian problems.

In a video that went viral in November 2020 in Uwasota town in Benin City, Nigeria, the Master of Ceremony for the wedding reception explained that as soon as the bridal dance was ready to commence on a bright November dry season afternoon. Suddenly, the weather became overcast, thunder and lightning rent the atmosphere and heavy downpours took over just within the area of the reception event. In less than thirty minutes, the breeze has blown off the canopies, the seats, the musical amplifier burnt, the

arena flooded with water and thereafter, the sun reappeared again as the rain mysteriously receded (Opera News, 2020).

The second incident which took place in January 2021, is a video of a trader who sold bags of rice worth hundreds of thousands of naira to an unknown customer who paid cash. Shortly after the customer drove off with the goods, the whole money he paid the vendor turned into white papers the size of naira currency notes (Linda Ikeji Blog). It was also reported in the same video that this type of incident is now rampant in Edo state. The last incident is a scenario in Ezeagu local government area of Enugu state where “palm wine was being poured into a porous basket without it leaking”(Patience Adama).

These are typical African IKTs which are often relegated to metaphysics, magic or others akin to modern science and technology. For this reason, people resent further inquiry into it and the practitioners take advantage to keep the knowledge secret further. The researchers argue that most modern sciences and technologies started as a figment of one’s imagination, something like magic and then developed from the unknown to the known state. They insist that until African IKT is given scholarly attention, the practice will continue to exist in its present state.

Conclusion

The superiority of African IKTs could be sought in their durability, economy and precision, and we can use surveillance devices to explain this. Several factors can make modern surveillance devices to fail. For example, an expert can dismount or cover the lens of a modern surveillance device, several factors can make the device’s power supply malfunction, it could raise false alarms when an animal instead of a human being crosses the boundary and so on. But all these cannot apply to African indigenous technological surveillance devices. Its function is direct to the target, for example, if it is deployed to protect a yam barn

from theft; for instance, any thief that gets into the barn and attempts to steal the yam gets stuck in the barn until the owner surfaces. It does not stop people from trespassing. Its main function is to safeguard the yams from being taken away by unknown person(s). This does not mean, however, that there are no demerits of African IKTs but that they are minimal compared to modern ones.

The abandonment of IKTs over time and the need to return to them for the yoke of modern technological backwardness to be broken in Africa is yet another 21st Century challenge. Chinweizu affirms that “one of the wonders of our time is that African indigenous knowledge has captured the interest of the imperialists. They now sponsor studies of what they profoundly despise. But why?” (40). Chinweizu’s question here needs an in-depth critical examination. For example, why have Western pharmaceutical companies suddenly become interested in African herbs and their uses? These were the same plants our ancestors developed and used to maintain their health over time, and when the colonialists invaded Africa, they derogated these traditional practices and attempted to outlaw most of them. Today they have developed a new interest in them to the extent that many Western academic institutions sponsor programmes for their development. This sudden interest is tricky and poses a further threat because a lot of successful experimental works on African IKTs have been done by African intellectuals as ‘Impact Factor papers’ with their results domiciled in Western countries, journals and libraries. They may modernize and then sell them back to Africa at huge costs.

The researchers are worried about this perceived ugly trend and therefore recommend that Nigerian ‘the giant of Africa’ should pioneer the incorporation of IKTs into her educational system and curriculum to theorize, modernise and remove unnecessary ritualistic encumbrances so that they can viably compete with other

global knowledge in terms of science and technology for practical and scientific purposes other than mere ritualistic aesthetics.

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