

Satire in Igbo Oral Tradition: The Case of *Umuada* Songs

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Abstract

This study is based on a type of song rendered by *Umuada*, a collective name for daughters of a particular clan of the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria. It exposes this type of poetry to scholars of African literature and assesses the elements of satire and other poetic qualities in the songs. It, as well, analyses their themes. Out of a good number sung by *Umuada*, four are selected for the purpose of this study. Thematically, the songs deal with laziness, failure in civic responsibility, sexual immorality, pretence and hypocrisy. They possess a feature present in every satiric work and that is to ridicule and expose a folly. They are simple in nature with few words and lengthy presentations. The selected *Umuada* songs are studied using the sociological theory because they treat social issues. Interviews and library research are used in carrying out this study. It is found out that the selected songs possess all features of satirical poetry and so should be regarded as such.

Keywords: *Umuada*, satire, poetry, satirical poetry and oral forms

Introduction

The traditional African society sees poetry as an effective instrument for interpreting life because it is a means of pleasure and a tool for criticism. Poetry surfaces in virtually every aspect of their lives from birth to death. Activities such as naming, marriage and funeral ceremonies are embellished with different forms of poetry. Other serious issues that take place in the society are also often addressed using poetry. The poetic genre is used for a variety of purposes and on occasions which could be religious, political and for pure satiric purposes. This study focuses on the satiric purpose of *Umuada* songs in Igboland.

When a work of art is aimed at exposing or ridiculing the abnormal characteristics of institutions or individuals in the society in order to deter others from such, it is a satire. This form of art has found a solid ground in the genre of drama and contains a great deal of humour (Akwanya 133; Nwabueze 86). It is a literary art that ridicules vice in a society in order to expose or correct some anomalies. It evokes attitudes of scorn, contempt or amusement. The objects of scorn are generally familiar and contemporary to the age. They are usually taken for granted and perhaps ignored. The satirist, therefore, does the duty of bringing, to the consciousness of the people, these follies with the intention of correcting them. Satire can be prosaic, dramatic or poetic. The concern of this work is with its poetic form.

Okoye's definition of poetry as "the verbal form or expression of strongly felt, beautiful and, or inspired emotion, thought, idea or imagination in concentrated or rhythmical language usually but not always with a metrical pattern" (8) buttresses Wordsworth's classical definition of the genre as the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquility. Poetry can possess or present many things. Philosophies, emotions and sentiments can be embodied in poetry which can have lyrical, reflective, descriptive or narrative qualities. It can as well, be "satirical, or funny, or political or just informative" (Wolosky 3). Although all these features stated by

Wolosky are possessed by poetry, they are not specific to the genre and so do not differentiate it from other forms of literature. According to Okpe who, poetry has two basic requirements. One is its ability “to touch us emotionally so that we feel either delight or pain” (10); second is that it stirs “our minds deeply so that we think intelligently on some concepts or aspects of life” (11). Okoye summarily puts it thus: “Poetry is felt and cannot be completely or satisfactorily defined or described” (8). It can be divided into two broad parts based on their modes of transmission. First is oral poetry, that which is chanted, and often improvised by the performer in a community. This form predates the second one which is written poetry – that which is put down in lines and verses, produced by a poet in a literate society. Both oral and written forms of poetry have a purpose. According to Chukwueloka and Asika, poetry is:

A tool for criticism with which poets mock and satirize societal actions, values and attitude in the hopes of correcting and instilling in the people the right and ethical moral values which in no small measure will institute a more harmonious, idyllic and tension free society as well as engineer a more appreciable peaceful co-existence among individuals in society (354).

It is in the above assertion that the social relevance of poetry lies.

Although many writers see satirical poetry as different from lyric, its form presents it as a lyric poem which is comparatively simple and musical in diction. It could be described as a lyric poem because it “expresses feelings and emotions...and contains a single theme” (Okoye 85). Just as an elegy expresses mourning of the dead in serious manner and an ode praises someone, a satirical poem mocks someone or an institution. According to Ogene, “The lyric poems are generally short without fixed forms. The varieties include: the elegy, the odes and nearly all other poems written” (8). It is on this premise that a satirical poem could be said to be a lyric as well. Satirical poetry, therefore, consists of derisive songs that are used to ridicule perpetrators of evil in the society.

It gathers some obvious human vices and follies and ridicules them with the aim of correcting them. Satirical poetry has a long history which dates to the Romans. It is also an African oral form. Other forms of African oral poetry include the panegyric, elegiac, religious, special purpose poetry like war songs, political song and lullabies.

Umụada songs can be seen as an example of satirical poetry. These songs are rendered in Igboland. The Igbo people are found in the south – east geopolitical area of Nigeria which comprises of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. The concept of *Umụada* is a strong union which unites all daughters of a particular clan, village, town or state, whether old, young, single, married, separated or divorced. This group is a powerful socio-political institution in Igbo society, a very useful organization for women. It helps in conflict resolution and organizes some activities which help its members to lessen certain economic burdens. They have ways of exerting influence and moral authority. The *Umụada's* most important ritual function is at funerals of a lineage member, since no one could have a proper funeral without their participation. It is mostly at funeral ceremonies that the *Umụada* sing and dance.

The position of women in the rendition of poetry in African society is not negligible. Finnegan states that “certain kinds of poetry are typically delivered or sung by women” (98). Nwoga also is of the view that “women song/dance groups continue the satiric strain” (231). Kolawale agrees that “women's voices remain audible, as we see in satirical songs and poetry which are women's domain” (92). The *Umụada* sing different types of songs, some of which are satirical in nature. Their songs are accompanied with musical instruments and dance. Some of the lines are often demonstrated. Fictional names are usually mentioned in such songs and their themes are varied. The songs are oral in form and are performed for various purposes. The obvious among them is their ability to entertain the audience. They lighten the mood of mourners at funeral ceremonies. Interwoven with the purpose of entertainment is that of

correction.

In addition to the earlier-stated functions of the songs, their presenters just like any other singing group “may acquire a material profit” (Finnegan 101). *Umụada*'s performance is almost synonymous with monetary rewards. Because they perform at funerals of their relatives, they expect other relatives to appreciate their display. They value this to the extent that praise songs are sung for those who recognize their presence in a special way. Their songs not only touch the audience emotionally so that they feel either delight or pain, they also embody some imaginative, sensuous and intellectual dimensions (Okoye 11; Okpewho 10).

Umụada songs are simple in nature because they make use of simple clear sentences. Finnegan has it that their verbal content “tends to be short (though the actual performance may be lengthy)” (235). These qualities coupled with a familiar audience bring about the simplicity of these songs. Okpewho explains that a satirical poet is “very much limited to the small local or ethnic environment with which he was familiar” (27) and so his audience is easily amused. Satirical poetry is usually functional, serving a specific purpose in specific times. It is not usually presented for its beauty; it is tied up to social activities.

The performance of *Umụada* songs is not different from other satirical poems. Finnegan lists the variegated aspects which contribute to the effectiveness of the performance of an oral piece and they include: “expressiveness of tone, gesture, facial expression, dramatic use of pause and rhythm, the interplay of passion, dignity, or humour, receptivity to the reactions of the audience, etc.” (5-6). She further adds that “...the performer has various visual resources at his disposal. The artist is typically face to face with the public and can take advantage of this to enhance the impact and even sometimes the content of his words” (7). The songs perform the functions of satire because the genre, in whatever form it is expressed, has the same objective “in all cultures,

and that is, to degrade a subject” (Darah 21). These songs use poetry as their vehicle and satire as the idea.

Some communities in Africa have some songs which are similar to *Umụada* songs in function and have been termed satirical songs and poetry by authorities in African literature. Such songs include *Halo* of Ewe people of Togo, *Udje* of Urhobo people of Nigeria (Ojaide 4), *Nzema* songs of Ghana, *Egungun* of Yoruba people of Nigeria (Kolawale 92), *Zambo* of Hausa people of Nigeria and such songs performed by the Kivu of the former Belgian Congo and Acoli people of Uganda (Darah 15).

Against the above background, therefore, there is the need to carry out a study on some *Umụada* songs to assert their appropriateness as satirical poetry. The purpose of this study is to explore the veracity of *Umụada* songs as a type of African poetry in oral form. This research is limited to collection and study of four songs. The collection is based on the themes of the songs and they are presented in their original Igbo language and English translations.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts the sociological theory. This theory is rooted in the idea that literature is a product of the society. It looks at literature from the perspective of social issues and its relevance to the society. The foundation for this approach to literature is the belief that art is not merely produced; it is a work of an author set in time and space responding to his community. The writer's or performer's environment helps to explain social attitudes and opinions that appear in a literary piece or performance.

As ascertained by Akporobaro, “the study of African oral literature has reached an advanced stage in which the *literariness* of the various genres is being analysed, described and evaluated” and “are most propitious to a literary artistic analysis from several perspective” (515). It is for this

reason that sociological approach is considered appropriate for this study. Although *Umụada* songs are cultural materials transmitted orally from one generation to another using the local language, they can be studied using this literary approach. Sociological approach is suitable in the sense that *Umụada* songs express Igbo thoughts and social beliefs. Ethical values and codes of conduct are expressed through them.

Data Analyses

When the beauty of a work of art is firmly fixed in images and sounds, the genre of poetry comes to mind. Images are created using devices such as simile, metaphor, personification, synecdoche, metonymy and hyperbole while sounds are created using rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, assonance, consonance, refrain, repetition and onomatopoeia. These figures of speech help in bringing out the beauty of poetry. Both oral and written poetry have these qualities. Although there may be a problem of structural arrangement in oral poetry, the use of rhyme or refrain helps in developing the structure. *Umụada* songs possess these qualities and their presenters use images which are familiar to the audience and sound effects are achieved through the use of various devices. They can be presented in stanzas because of the presence of refrains or choruses. According to Okoye, “a refrain is the repetition of one or more phrases or lines at intervals in a poem, usually at the end of a stanza. The refrain often takes the form of a chorus” (26). The presence of refrains or choruses, he further explains, helps us “mark the end of a stanza, hence the end of a segment of thought,...it aids in segmenting the poem” (35). Refrains, therefore, give the songs one characteristic of poetry on which all its other rudiments have to rely: the line. In the words of Ojaide:

The use of chorus/refrain/call-and-response affords the lead singer opportunity to relax, inhale and exhale, and at the same time have a moment to recapture from memory what is ahead. Repetitions, especially in the form of refrain, is commonly used by African poets of both the older and the younger generations (25).

Furthermore, to achieve good sound effect, the voice plays a vital role in the performance of these songs. As affirmed by Darah, “tonal variation and pitch are important if melody as a basic element of music is to be created” (xiii). Also Ojaide states that “in most traditional African songs, voice and not words, imposes rhyme because of the tonality of the languages. The singer/poet/performer can always end a breath-space, a line equivalent with a vowel sound such as a drawn-out o-o-o or e-e-e-” (22). This also helps in maintaining the rhythm of the songs. Its presence also helps in forming rhyme schemes for the songs (Ojaide 22). These features are found in *Umụada* songs.

Another dominant feature of *Umụada* songs which makes them poetic is emotion. Their thoughts and their emotional response to some events or experiences are the foundation of these songs (Egudu 247 – 248). The poet creates out of the feelings he has towards some societal ills such as greed and materialism, sexual immorality, failure in one's civic responsibilities, laziness and other follies and vices which the society frowns at. He, therefore, through his works, condemns such behaviour. To illustrate these features, four *Umụada* songs are presented and analyzed based on their themes which include the following: laziness, failure in civic responsibility, sexual immorality, pretence and hypocrisy.

Laziness

“Nwanyị Di Ya Fụrụ N'Anyā”

Part 1

Nwanyị di ya fụrụ n'anya

Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.

Nwanyị di ya fụrụ n'anya

Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.

E bute akpa rice, o richaa.

Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.

E bute akpa beans, o richaa.

Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
Ebute akpa okporoko, o tachaa.
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
Ị nepụ anya na fridge, ọmadelu.
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
E gote lipstick, ọ nyasia.
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
E gote cortex, ọ nyasia.
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
E gote eye shadow, ọ nyasia.
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
Odinara na bed, ọ ghasalụ
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
A kpa ya aka n'ọnụ, ọ murja.
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
Nwanyị bia lụọ ọlụ oo.
Anaghị m alụ oo.
Na di m fụrụ m n'anya.
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.

Translation

A woman loved by her husband
She is afraid of work.
A woman loved by her husband
She is afraid of work.
She consumes a bag of rice.
She is afraid of work.
She consumes a bag of beans.
She is afraid of work.
She consumes a bag of stock fish.
She is afraid of work.
Her fridge is stuffed.
She is afraid of work.

Whenever lipstick is bought, she uses it excessively.
She is afraid of work.
Whenever nail polish is bought, she it uses excessively.
She is afraid of work.
Whenever eye shadow is bought, she uses it excessively.
She is afraid of work.
She lies carelessly on the bed.
She is afraid of work.
She smiles whenever her mouth is touched.
She is afraid of work.
Woman, come and work.
I won't work.
My husband loves me.
She is afraid of work.

Part II

Nwoke be ya gbalụ gharij
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
Nwoke be ya gbalụ gharij
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
Ojee na beer parlour, ọ ghasalụ.
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
Ojee ebe ana-ata anụ, ọ ghasalụ.
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
Ojee ebe ana-añu nkụ, ọ ghasalụ.
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
Ojee ebe ana- ama njakili, ọ ghasalụ.
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.
Nwoke bja naa be gi oo.
Anaghị m ana oo
Na bem gbalụ m gharij.
Ọnye ụjọ ọlụ.

Translation

A man who is confused about his home
 He is afraid of work.
 A man who is confused about his home
 He is afraid of work.
 He goes to bar and forgets himself.
 He is afraid of work.
 He goes wherever meat is being eaten and forgets himself.
 He is afraid of work.
 He goes wherever drink is being taken and forgets himself.
 He is afraid of work.
 He goes to where jokes are being cracked and forgets himself.
 He is afraid of work.
 Man, come and go home.
 I won't go.
 I am confused about my home.
 He is afraid of work.

This song satirizes value for fashion and trivial things. It has two parts. Initially, it had one part which satirizes only the women folk but lately, the women who themselves sing the song thought it necessary to satirize their male counterparts as well (Felicia Ezika. Personal interview).

The first part of this song is used to condemn women who abhor work because they feel they are loved by their husbands who afford their family needs and do not care whether their wives work or not. The second part satirizes men who are confused about their homes or families. They cannot put their houses in order and consequently they prefer staying out to staying with their families. Their laziness is seen in the fact that they cannot exercise their responsibilities as fathers or husbands in their various homes.

This song uses hyperbole which Spurr defines as the “overshooting, where fact is extravagantly exaggerated for serious or comic effect”

(375) to drive home its theme. Lines 5, 7, 9 and 11 of the first part exaggerate the rate at which these lazy women eat or the extent to which their loving husbands provide them with food items. Lines 13, 15, and 17 of the same part exaggerate the rate at which they pay attention to their looks and appearance. They wear excessive make-up because their husbands supply them with those items. With the use of euphemism in lines 19 and 21, the song describes how loose and careless these women can be. The use of exaggeration to elicit laughter from the audience is also achieved in the second part of the song. Lines 5, 7 and 9 describe, in an exaggerated manner, how confused some men can be to the extent that they spend much of their time eating and drinking in bars and restaurants forgetting that they have wives and children at home.

“*Nwanyị Di Ya Furu N'anya*” has a rhythm of alternating successive lines which is regular enough to become predictable apart from the last four lines of each of the part where the voice of the personae is heard.

Failure in Civic Responsibility

Some *Umụada* songs convey the theme of failure in civic responsibility. One of such songs is “*Naalụ m ọda*”. The song goes thus:

Naalụ m ọda. Naalụ m ọda.
 Chorus: Naalụ m ọda, ọ kwa n'omeghị gị n'ahụ.
 Naalụ m ọda. Naalụ m ọda.

Chorus:
 Naalụ m ọda, na m ja-abịa m leeti.
 Chorus
 Naalụ m ọda na di m ga-anata.
 Chorus
 Naalụ m ọda na ahụ na-anwụ m.
 Chorus
 Ọ mee gi n'ahụ, idobe ihu ka mkpi.

Chorus

Ọ mee gi n'ahụ I dobe ihu ka nsị.

Chorus

Translation

Obtain permission for me. Obtain permission for me.

Chorus: Obtain permission for me because it did not happen to you.

Obtain permission for me. Obtain permission for me.

Chorus

Obtain permission for me, I will be late.

Chorus

Obtain permission for me, my husband will return.

Chorus

Obtain permission for me, I am sick.

Chorus

If it happens to you, you will keep your face like that of a he-goat.

Chorus

If it happens to you, you will keep your face like faeces.

Chorus

This song satirizes those people who give flimsy excuses for their absence or lateness to funeral ceremonies. In Igbo land, attendance of funerals is a very important civic responsibility. Societies and groups such as churches, age grades, *umuada*, *umunna* and other social organizations which have a fallen colleague compulsorily attend his/her funeral ceremony. Relatives of the dead person are also expected to honour the dead and console the closer relatives with their presence and gifts. It, therefore, becomes a failure in one's responsibilities when one does not attend a funeral ceremony. In order not to be seen as a deviant, one who cannot attend a funeral gives a flimsy excuse so as not to be punished as prescribed by the constitution of one's association. Lines 5, 7 and 9 give some examples of excuses which such people give. The

song summarily informs this group of people that they give such excuses because the deceased is not very closely related to them; otherwise, they would have been in pain and sorrow as presented by the similes in lines 11 and 13.

Sexual Immorality

“Ọyị M, Mọnịka”

Chorus: Ọyị m, Mọnịka nwee ndidi ee

Mgbe a na-agwọlụ gi okpoloko,

I gwalụ nne gi, Moni oo?

Chorus: Ọyị m Mọnịka, nwee ndidi ee.

Mgbe a na-akpọlụ gi azụ gbamgbam,

I gwalụ nne gi, Moni oo?

Chorus: Ọyị m Mọnịka nwee ndidi ee.

Ọ bịa lu ka i dīlī ime,

I je gwa nne gi, Moni oo.

Chorus: Ọyị m Mọnịka nwee ndidi ee.

I na-agwadụ nne gi oo

Ka ọ medụ aghaa, Moni oo?

Chorus: Ọyị m Mọnịka, nwee ndidi ee

Translation

“My Friend Monica”

Chorus: My friend Monica, have patience ee.

When stockfish dish was being prepared for you,

Did you tell your mother, Moni?

Chorus: My friend, Monica have patience ee

When canned fish was being opened for you,

Did you tell your mother, Moni?

Chorus: My friend, Monica have patience ee

Now you have become pregnant

You went and told your mother, Moni.

Conclusion

The study embarked on the collection and analysis of four *Umụada* songs. It dwelt on satire which is a poetic genre and a technique in literature that creates an atmosphere to laugh at the abnormalities or vices in a given society in order to deter people from engaging in such acts. This form of art can be present in novels, plays or poems. For the purpose of this research, emphasis is on the satire which comes in form of poems.

The study has examined *Umụada* songs in particular which are simple in nature with simple sentences and clear images. They have little verbal contents but their performance is lengthy. A song of few lines can be repeated over and over again and that adds to its simplicity. Although the poetic qualities between the original and the translated forms of the *Umụada* songs have a considerable difference, an attempt is made to preserve, as much as possible, the poetic arrangements which is achieved through the use of refrains, choruses and responses as well as the images in the songs. According to Okoye, “poetry is compressed, suggesting the unknown; it is compelling; it is pictorial and filled with imagery; it is acoustic with rhythm and music” (106).

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Interview

- Ezika, Felicia. Personal interview. 14th December, 2020. A 73 years old woman who participates in the activities of *Umụada*. She hails from Alor, Anambra State.

Chorus: My friend, Monica have patience ee
 Are you telling your mother
 For her to do what, Moni?
 Chorus: My friend, Monica have patience ee

In the words of Nwoga, “without doubt, the most persistent subject of the satirical comment in Igbo oral traditions is misdemeanor against sexual morality” (233). “*Oyi M Monika*” satirizes a wayward young woman who eventually got pregnant. The poet addresses this young woman Monica (shortened to Moni), asking her a series of questions. The use of chorus in developing the structure of the song is evident. The chorus marks the end of one stanza as well as the end of a segment of thought. The stanzas of the song are in line with Abrams definition that stanzas of a given poem are usually “marked by a recurrent pattern of rhyme and are uniform in the number and lengths of the component lines” (Abrams 340). This is better observed when the song is sung using the correct tone variation.

Figuratively, the two striking images used in this song are 'okpoloko' and 'azụ gbamgbam' (stockfish and canned fish). These two items used to be the food for the rich in the forties, fifties and the early sixties. Young girls who were greedy were, therefore, lured into the beds of men who were able to provide such items for them (Felicia Ezika: Personal interview). The two items are symbolically used here for every other material thing given to these girls by their lovers which their mothers were never aware of. The song emphasizes the need for patience and self control using some rhetorical questions.

Pretence and Hypocrisy

Some *Umada* songs possess these themes of pretence and hypocrisy, a case where a presented situation is not the actual situation. An example is below:

“Oche Eze”
 Oche eze, nwanyị mma, oche eze.

Oche eze, nwanyị mma, oche eze.
 Nwanyị bja mbụ, e bunye ya oche a na-ebunye eze.
 Nwanyị bja mbụ, e bunye ya oche a na-ebunye eze.
 O kwee ya izu naabọ, a nara ya oche eze bunye isi.
 Onye isi eburunu oche.
 Agbataobi e delụ nwayọọ.
 Oche eze ee, oche eze.

Translation

“Seat of a King”

Seat of a king, good woman, seat of a king.
 Seat of a king, good woman, seat of a king.
 When a woman comes first, she is given the seat of a king.
 When a woman comes first, she is given the seat of a king.
 After two local weeks, the seat is taken away from her and given
 back to the head.
 The head carries the seat.
 Neighbours keep calm.
 Seat of a king, seat of a king.

This song satirizes the treatment given to women when they are newly married into a particular family. When a woman newly gets married, she is treated as a queen by her in-laws and other fellow women married into that family. But after some time, she starts being treated like her fellow women. The head of the family remains the only person who is accorded such respect and honour. This will silence those who complain about the special treatment given to a particular woman. This 'special treatment' is symbolized by “Oche eze”, seat of a king, while 'izu naabọ' (two local weeks) summarizes the short time when the newly married women receive a special treatment. The repetition of “seat of a king” in lines 1, 2, and 8 add to the rhythm of the song.