Traditions of Rhetoric in Modern Nigerian Drama

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Abstract
The word rhetoric, which originated from the Greek word rhetor, means speaker and originally referred to the art of public speaking. The thrust of this art is therefore considered as the intellectual ability of a speaker to compose and arrange a speech that would be persuasive through its intellectual, emotional and dramatic appeal to an audience. Since the birth of African literature at odd hours of human civilization and endless western victimization of innocent African enclave, the traditions of rhetoric in its focus on language, tropes and audience, have predominantly influenced the main ideas, intrigues and currents in African literature. Against this backdrop, this study will interrogate the traditions of rhetoric as seen in modern African drama via the rhetorical speeches and proverbs in Zulu Sofola’s King Emene, Onyeka Onyekuba’s Regal Dance and Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh’s Olamma.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Proverbs, Culture, Values, Persuasion

Introduction
Historically, rhetoric originated in ancient Greece in the fifth century BC. It owed its early development to the Sophists, Aristotle and then, in the Roman world, to Cato, Cicero and
According to Chinwe Okechukwu, “Rhetoric has been seen as the bedrock of an organized society from the classical times to the present. It embraces different arms of government in society, including the judicial, the political, and the ceremonial”. (45) As much as the art of rhetoric, from the time of Corax (5th Century B.C), mostly concerned itself with judicial and political notions, it has on a larger scale focused on cultural and communities values in epidictic rhetoric from the time of Gorgias (483-376BC). The cultural norms, that rhetoric addresses often anchors the existentialist philosophy of the survival of many nations or societies all over the world. In spite of the obvious presence of rhetoric in the governance of societies in the world, rhetoric has a deeper influence in the literature of many societies.

From the above impression, it is important to state that the inter-relationship of rhetoric and literature sheds considerable light on African writer’s use of the dramatic medium to persuade. The historical trajectory of rhetoric and literature aids the divergent visions and missions of the dramaturgy of many playwrights in Nigerian literary scene. It could be a fact in some quarters that Aristotle did not directly equate rhetoric to poetics in Rhetoric; some of his strong pronouncements in On the Art of Poetry (Poetics) connect the two distinct disciplines. In Poetics where Aristotle deals with thought, he asserts that thought belongs to rhetoric and also manifests in poetic speeches. Thought, which Aristotle sees as the third principle of tragedy, is “the ability to say what is possible and appropriate in any given circumstance; it is what, in the speeches in the play, is related to the art of politics and rhetoric” (40). What is more important here is that Aristotle sees thought to include “all the effects that have to be produced by means of language; among [which] are proof and
refutation, the awakening of emotions such as pity, fear, anger, and the like, and also exaggeration and depreciation” (57-58). As such, Aristotle believes that rhetoric has natural tendency to teach and delight. More importantly, poetics use rhetoric as part of the elements of an effective composition.

Literary artists, especially those in African society, sometimes, use their works as a forum for defending their theses. This is the line of argument for Wayne C. Booth when he states that “great literature and drama work rhetorically to build and strengthen communities.” (99). So far, many writers practising their trade of creative writing have not relented in this aspect.

Isocrates sees rhetoric as the foundation of human society, the means through which man expresses his wisdom and without which wisdom is inarticulate and inert. Isocrates’s viewpoint is that rhetoric has the power to direct public affairs, influence others in the actions of men on daily basis and by which people make decisions about moral conduct in the society. In essence, rhetoric becomes an instrument of oratory and social cohesion when there is a society and people to persuade.

Against the backdrop that rhetoric brings about social cohesion, there is also the fact that it also has the power to cause disintegration and can have serious consequences when dismembered, with dialectics seeking to persuade alone and verbal dexterity performing the suasory function on its own. Rhetoric, according to Aristotle, uses logos, ethos, and pathos to persuade. The rhetorician uses a combination of dialectically analyzed logos of the subject of persuasion arrived at through induction or deduction and appeals to both the ethical and the pathetical dimensions of the suasory
situation in order to make the audience believe in the thesis presented to it.

Stepping further, Aristotle sees rhetoric as a counterpart of dialectics and recognizes that neither rhetoric nor dialectics can perform effectively in a suasory endeavor without the other. Cicero stresses the need for “rhetoric to go hand in hand with dialectics” (50). In the same direction, Quintilian defines an orator as “a good man skilled in speaking” (58). Richard Weaver, taking his cue from Aristotle, asserts that “dialectic and rhetoric are distinguishing able stages of argumentation, with dialectic defining the subject and rhetoric actualizing the possibilities raised by dialectical reasoning” (27). He goes further to say that rhetoric is “truth plus its artful presentation”. He, thus, demonstrates in his article “the cultural role of rhetoric”, that the fate of a rhetorician who has just dialectical skill but does not have power of speech to persuade” (65). In Weaver’s “Language is Sermonic” and Ideas have Consequences as well as in the works of such other eminent commentators on language as Michael Foucault (The Order of Discourse), Kenneth Burke (A Grammar of Motives). Ivor A. Richards (The Philosophy of Rhetoric) and Mikhail Bakhtin (The Problem of Speech Genres), language is never neutral and therefore be manipulated to change the auditor's view. The rhetor, as a result, in Weaver’s postulation, has the responsibility of discerning matters in their proper perspectives and of conveying the matters thus discerned in order to guide the audience in making there right choice.

By and large, the importance of rhetoric in human civilization is enormous. The African writers, even those who write in the dramatic mode, have also incorporated rhetoric into their dramatic output. By this assertion, there holds the interrogation of the use of rhetoric in African drama with
selected plays such as Zulu Sofola’s *King Emene*, Onyeka Onyekuba’s *Regal Dance*, and Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh’s *Olamma*. It is important to state that rhetoric in its focus on language, tropes and audience has from time immemorial influenced the oral and written literature of Africa. The thrust of this study, therefore, will be on the power of the rhetoric in Igbo proverbs and persuasive speeches in the selected plays. These plays have been chosen to show the extent in which African modern playwrights negotiate the strength of rhetoric in Igbo proverbs and persuasive speeches. It could be argued in some quarters that this study should have a feminist framework based on the feminine background. But it is not so, for this study is simply a scholarly paper that relies on the effectiveness of the persuasive language as seen in the varieties of Igbo proverbs used in the plays.

African culture possesses a repertoire of formulations & oral narratives and uses them often as rhetorically effective means of transmitting accumulated knowledge and experience. This fact is in line with Kwesi Yankah’s thought when he said “there are three factors that make the proverb an effective persuasive strategy: appeal to cultural truth, literary value and impersonal form (40). Equally important is ‘the way we live in Africa’ as seen from the critical lens of cultural scholars like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, F.C. Ogbalu, Nolue Emenanjo, Ernest Emenyonu, Romanus Egudu, Charles Nnolim, Helen Chukwuma, Rems Umeasiegbu, Nkem Okoh, Emmanuel Obiechina and Chimalum Nwankwo, can be explored through proverbs, riddles, tales, folksongs, idioms, myths, rituals and legends. The art of persuasion in these oral traditional elements equally produce the effect of rhetoric in them.
Furthermore, the rhetorical qualities of Igbo proverbs are social metaphor and the representation of African philosophy in which the whole range of existentialist experience, principles, instructive issues, revolutionary visions, dreams and aspirations are brought to social reality. In the demonstration of the belief that man is the cause of his actions, some Igbo proverbs are selected from Onyekuba’s *Regal Dance*.

1. “…getting the fly on somebody else’s sore killed on your own legs” (*Regal Dance* 5).
2. “Is it not from the house of the coward that fingers are pointed to the ruins of what used to be the house of the valiant?” (*Regal Dance* 5).

In the worldview of the play, the village women who announced the death of Akabuike engaged themselves in an argument because of their divergent views about the character of Akabuike. The second woman was in support of Akabuike and his evil deed while the other women were against it. The second woman then says: “that’s your business…if I were you, I would just mind my business, or else, you will end up getting the fly on somebody else’s sore killed on your own legs.”

In response to the second woman’s speech, the first woman said to the fifth woman: my sister, just close your mouth. Truth died long ago. Nowadays, nobody is interested in speaking the truth. Those who tried to speak the truth, we saw what happened to them. Where are our men who were men? Where are our men of valour? ... Where are those men who spoke against Akabuike’s foul deed and the pollution of our town? What has happened to them? The remaining ones
became wiser and withdrew. They are just like cowards. Do you blame them? Who does not value his life? “is it not from the house of coward that fingers are pointed to the ruins of what used to be the house of the valiant?” *(Regal Dance 5).*

In the first proverb, the second woman tries to win the argument by reprimanding the other women for intruding in a problem that does not concern them. She is one of the characters in the play who believes that no matter how evil one is, people should not interfere in others’ businesses, else they get hurt. Caution is very important in some situations and places, especially where there is conflict. The rhetoric in this proverb suggests that one should not get involved in a matter without knowing its details or the consequences in interfering in it might bring big troubles upon oneself.

The second proverb by the first woman to the fifth woman shows that things have changed and only those who follow change can survive. The rhetoric in the second proverb is used to show that in a situation where misfortune reigns, people lose human dignity and quality because people no longer have the power to have control over their own lives. In times of adversity, people who are subjected to degrading conditions are always at the mercy of the fortunate ones. In other words, there is no greatness when human beings are silenced by destiny.

The proverb is about the people of Ubibi’s discontent and debasing condition of destitution. In a forced situation, which the likes of Akabuike subjected them, the people also reflects the importance of showing moral stamina in a situation where people are unable to air their views freely because of severe oppression.
Moreover, some proverbs in Igbo land are used to show that man should act responsibly and appropriately. The proverbs when said are used to guide moral conduct in the society. An individual must know his limitations in life in order to succeed in the society. These proverbs are used by Onyekuba, a rhetorician, through her character to show what was mentioned above.

1. If you decide to chase a naked madman and you are naked too, two of you would be regarded as madmen (*Regal Dance* 20).
2. Our people ask a masquerade that flogs a stranger, if it would ever go to other lands again? (*Regal Dance*, 35).

The rhetoric in these proverbs depicts the need for morality in the society.
As such the proverbs are used to guide moral conduct of man. In the worldview of the play, the first proverb explains how the Igbo traditional society abhors or forbids murder/revenge. The voices of the first man, second man and the flutist in the extract below show how Igbo does not accept murder/revenge.

**FLUTIST:** I heard that one of those who shot him was Mbadu’s son. Those who were close said that he told Akabuike that he was back from the prison, before he shot and killed him…

**IST MAN:** He should not have taken laws into his hands. Now that they have been caught, he will be tried and killed, what did he gain by soiling his hands? He had no right to shed human blood. There is no justification for murder.
FLUTIST: yes, he should not have killed Akabuike, but what was his position.

IST MAN: Didn’t you hear the story? I was not there but I heard that Akabuike sent the boy to trade cocaine for him and the boy was later convicted and jailed…

2ND MAN: The story had it that Akabuike was behind his arrest and corroborated the evidence of the police to ensure he was jailed for life. Then he came back home and took over Mbadu’s land saying that it was given to him by government for his industry. The poor old man died broken-hearted…

IST MAN: man, I still maintain that he should not have killed Akabuike. “If you decide to chase a naked madman and you are naked too, two of you would be regarded as madmen.” Both of them are now the same thing-murderers (19-20).

The Rhetorics in the proverb reveals the universal folly of man who sees himself to be wise but becomes the victim of his own mistakes, the incorrigible human characters both the traditional and the modern people, often overestimate themselves without for seeing the sharp mind of others. So far this is how rhetoric seen through the lens of Igbo proverbs can help to guide the moral conduct of man.

Some of such proverbs in the play are:

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I. It is the way a man dances that the music is made for him (19).
II. An upstart whose umbilical cord is not yet cut wants to eat meat before he grows teeth (25).
III. Anyone who toys with his god toys with his destiny (34)
IV. The earth said that a corpse is not a new thing to her (32)
V. It is a truism that the person you pity and help is the same one who slaps your face afterwards (28)
VI. The person whose god does not want him to see is the one who has a blind man for a god parent (34)
VII. It is he who has a back that can challenge death himself (29)
VIII. Something made the house rat fall from his hiding place in broad day light (28)
IX. It is a castrated man who shudders at the sight of a woman (27)
X. A message does not kill the messenger. The messenger delivers his message, but whether or not the receiver likes it, is not the messenger’s problem (24)
XI. If the heart is heavy, the body will not receive the best of food (36) etc.

Away from Onyekuba’s rhetorical use of Igbo proverbs, Zulu Sofola is another playwright that uses proverbs as an art of persuasion. As the first female playwright in Nigeria, Sofola’s plays often depict Igbo culture and traditions. Away from the use of proverbs for aesthetic and thematic use, the proverbs in *King Emene* lubricate dialogues and equally form warnings and guide which lead the protagonist; King Ogugua, to the provocations and resolution of the conflicts in the play. King
Ogugua flawed by Obstinacy is adequately portrayed in the under listed rhetorical proverbs.

1 …it is the way a woman dances that the music is made for her (19)
2 …it is the tree that makes the forest, and the king of the trees does not grow in a desert (18)
3 …If we don’t eat yam for the sake of the palm oil, we eat the palm oil for the sake of the yam (20)
4 …it is the way a child opens his hand that a piece of meat is given to him (20)
5 …anyone who toys with his god toys with his destiny (34)

The last Igbo proverb, “Anyone who toys with his god, toys with his destiny” is also found in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart. In this novel, Achebe cites an Igbo proverb which state that “when a man says yes, his chi also says yes” (Things Fall Apart 23). This proverb is used to eulogize Okonkwo and to depict him as an assertive person.

A replica of one fighting or opposing one’s ‘chi’ is also seen in Achebe’s Arrow of God when Ezeulu goes against Ulu’s warnings of leaving the battle of the gods for the gods. According to Ulu (the god):

“Ta! Nwanu”! Barked Ulu in his ear, as a spirit would in the ear of an impertinent human child. ‘Who told you that this was your own fight?...I say who told you that this was your own fight to arrange the way it suites you? You want to save your friends who brought you palm wine he-he-he-he!.. ‘Beware you do not come between me and my victim or you may receive blows not meant for you! Do you not know what happens when two elephants fight? Go home and
sleep and leave me to settle my quarrel with Idemili, whose envy seeks to destroy me that his python may again come to power. Now you tell me how it concerns you. I say go home and sleep. As for me and Idemili, we shall fight to finish: and whoever throws the other down will strip him of his ankle!’ (191-192).

In spite of this stem warning, Ezeulu still goes out of his way to punish the people according to the dictates of his mind, and tragedy befalls him at Obika’s sudden death and losing his mind.

The proverb “Anyone who toys with his god, toys with his destiny” (King Emene 34) shares similar context with “When a man says yes, his chi also says yes”. The rhetoric in this proverb aptly sums up the essence of determination and strong will, within one’s psychological context. Reference to god or chi, a person’s personal god in Igbo culture, is of connotative import. The message interpreted is that man must always take decisions for himself and resolve to do whatever will bring him good fortune.

Furthermore, the rhetorical nature of the above proverb in King Emene, helps to push for further argument on whether man is the architect of his fate. The deductions from the argument could mean man builds his destiny and can as well destroy it. An indepth analysis of the proverb could be somewhat termed as strictly personal viewpoint or what the reader response critic may see as your world, your view.

In another dimension, Tracy Utoh-Ezeajugh’s Olamma is a Nigerian tragic-comic play that depicts Igbo traditions and culture during colonialism. The subject matter of the play is
anchored on the agonies. Subjugation and liberation of womanhood in a typical Igbo society. Other female Igbo writers whose works share thematic parallel with Utoh-Ezeajugh’s Olamma are Flora Nwapa’s Edufa, Zulu Sofola Wedlock of the Gods. Osonye Tess Onwueme’s Shakara: Dance-Hall Queen, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s The Last of the Strong Ones and Onyeka Iwuchukwu Sons for my Son.

Utoh-Ezeajugh’s commitment towards liberation struggles of Igbo women can also be found in her other plays: Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again and Out of the Mask and Nneora: an African Dolls House. Critically, all the actions in Olamma revolve around the heroine of the play Olamma. The play opens with conflict. Odidika, the uncle of Olamma and a hunter from Umugwu, accidentally killed a woman at the forest of iseke. Odidika reveals: “You know it was an accident. My gun refused to fire when I pointed it at an Antelope in the forest. I therefore pointed it in another direction to find out why it refused to shoot. I did not know that a woman was there plucking leaves with which to wrap her Ogiri. Before I knew what was happening, a bullet had escaped out of the gun and I heard a shout” (9). Vengeance in the hands of men not the gods inspired the brave warriors of Ugwunzu led by Odogwu to galvanize and stormed the Obi of Dara Nwigbo. “A man among you killed a daughter of our land a market week ago. We demand compensation or we wage war against your people. Make your choice now!” (3).

The people of Umungwu pleaded for more time to decide on what to do but the warriors of Ugwunzu instantly demand for compensation of a young maiden to replace Okeke’s wife of Ugwunzu who was murdered and a boy of between eight and twelve years.(4). This dramatic scene shares an international relationship with Chinua Achebe’s Igbo heroic tale Things Fall Apart. Utoh-Ezeajugh re-enacts the scene upon which
Ikemefuna and a maiden were given out to Umuofia. Ikemefuna is a fifteen-year-old boy from a neighbouring clan, Mbaino, who is given up to Umuofia as a sacrifice for killing one of the women of Umuofia. He lives with Okonkwo’s family for three years before the elders ordered that he should be killed. In Olamma, the protagonist of the play (Olamma) and a young boy of twelve years, Onwubiko are the scapegoats. Olamma is the only female child of Agbomma, a widow and sister-in-law to Odidika: a treacherous man.

A twist to the story occurred when Olamma escaped on the way as she was taken alongside with Onwubiko to the land of Ugwunzu. Olamma in quest for freedom ran to a rural hospital in a distant community to hers. In this hospital, she met her destiny helper, Matron Florence. This matron, a European, employed Olamma as a hospital attendant and later a nurse. Matron Florence’s kindness and humanitarian services was glaring in all facets especially in stopping the killing of twins in many communities of Igbo land (62).

When influenza attacked the people of Umungwu, Olamma forgave her people and pleaded with Matron Florence to visit the community to heal the sick. Earlier, the dwellers of Umungwu sent a delegation to Matron Florence to come and treat sick people in the land. The ardent spokesperson of Umungwu, Dara Nwigbo’s voice is captured here: “this plague called influenza is in every household now. We are all affected and that is why I feel we should look for an urgent solution now… I heard that there is a white medicine woman at Mbano who can cure this disease” (39). Afterwards, Matron Florence and her medical team including Olamma set about giving treatment to the sick as Dara Nwigbo and other town’s people sit around discussing amongst themselves. As they
were discussing, Okwudili, a young boy of about eighteen years runs in panting and bearing news of an impending doom: war.

I was out hunting in the forest of Iseke, I was concealed on top of a tree trying to take aim a deer when I overheard three warriors of Ugwunzu discussing as they moved through the forest….. They are planning to attack our town on Eke day. They said they have already hired the notorious Abang warriors to aid them in wiping Umungwu off the face of the earth. (47)

On hearing the news of an impending attack, the villagers panic and begin to display different emotions of anxiety and fear. Olamma who had all this while been listening to the exchange appeals for calm.

My people do not be afraid on account of the news you have just received. No town can attack another town now and go free because of the white man’s government. We shall send a message to the whiteman who rules this district and he will send soldiers with foreign guns to come and defend us. If Ugwunzu dares attack us then by this time on Eke day Ugwunzu shall be no more. (48)

Olamma consults with Matron Florence who writes a note and gives to two of the load carriers to take to the District Officer. The messengers depart and the nurses try to bring calm back to the place as they resume the treatment of sick villagers. Umungwu people expressed gratitude to Olamma. She advised them not to thank her but rather should abolish some obnoxious customs. “The greatest honour you shall give me is to abolish inhuman practices that keep our women in perpetual bondage” (49). Her rhetorical speeches greatly influenced the actions of the people of Umungwu not to panic.
Downstage, we hear the villainous actions of Odidika. He sold Agbomma’s compound to Chinweuba. Agbomma holding unto Odidika says “kill me as you killed your brother so that you can finally inherit his land” (82). Agbomma’s screams attract the town’s people who hurry in from different locations to find out the course of Agbomma’s distress. On enquiry, Agbomma in between sobs and lamentations narrates her ordeal at the hands of Odidika. The villagers are appalled at the brazen manner in which Odidika perpetuates his acts of illegality and impunity. At this point, Chinweuba who has been agitated all the while, grips Odidika and demands for his money back. “So you are a rogue! I didn’t know I was doing business with a criminal. If you don’t give me my money now, I will show you my red eyes!” (82). Odidika, flustered and stuttering, says “My friend, exercise a little patience with my people. (83). Afterwards, Chinweuba punches him on the face and tries to rough – handle him. Odidika quickly brings out the money and hands it over to him. Chinweuba collects his money and strides away in anger.

Finally, the totality of one’s freedom is summed up in a way that the person in quest for freedom must outlive all factors that limits his/her freedom. Olamma was at this plane of truth. She was able to attain her freedom through western education. Behavioural strabismus that affects many African women could not stop her liberation struggles. She tells her mother:

Mama, I am woman in a woman’s body. It may sound strange to you or even incomprehensible if I try to explain that men and women are created equal. Women are capable of doing outstanding things if only society will give them opportunity. And the way to do this is to remove many restrictions that hinder women from exhibiting their full potentials. Most of our
customs are tailored the intimidation and suppression of women and the sooner somebody stands up to these men, the better. (91)

The power of this rhetorical speech just like Mark Anthony’s speech in William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, changed the perception of Umungwu towards women. Her stronghold on liberation struggles for women could be seen in her marriage to Okechukwu Nwando, a medical doctor from Obuno village in Ugwunzu town. She married him against all odds/obnoxious traditions of her people which forbid her from marrying a man from Ugwunzu. At last marriage and love united the two communities: Umungwu and Ugwunzu who had for decades been in consternation and untold animosity. Inspired with the tradition of rhetoric she achieves her heart desire.

From time immemorial, literature and rhetoric have shared a symbiotic relationship from the time both came into being. Etymologically, a rhetorician is a public speaker whose art involves addressing an audience, whether in a court of law or in a popular audience setting where he aims to influence, persuade, exhort, and instruct through manipulation of language. Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* contain rhetoric. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* codifies the art of rhetoric and rhetorical prowess became an art in politics. Roman rhetoricians like Cicero established a close relationship between rhetoric and literature. For African writers, rhetoric has been their platform to depict the oral traditions and culture of their communities. Proverbs submerged in oratory and speeches as an art of persuasion have so far been used by African writers to express their people’s historical predicament, consciousness, experiences, culture and oral traditions. The plays used for
The critical analysis in this study are Zulu Sofola’s *King Emene*, Onyeka Onyekuba’s *Regal Dance* and Tracie Chima Utob-Ezeajugh’s *Olamma*. The analysis of the plays in this study serves to elucidate the playwright’s intentions and disclose the variety of rhetorical methods they have used. Greatly explored, are proverbs in their rhetorical tendencies. However, this study provides a model for further research of indigenous rhetoric in African modern drama and will also help other researchers who seek to interrogate the interrelationship between rhetoric and literature in the general quest to expose the impact of African culture and literature on global civilization.

**Works Cited**


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