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Community and the Individual in the Dramatic World of the Igbo: Conformity and Contestation

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Short Biography

Osita Catherine Ezenwanebe Ph. D is an Association Professor of Theatre Arts in the Department of Creative Arts (Theatre Unit), University of Lagos, Nigeria. With a B.A in English Education, two Master of Arts Degrees in English Literature (Drama and Society) and in English Language (Nigerian English), and a Ph. D in English Literature (Drama and Society), Osita teaches dramatic theory and criticism among other courses.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Igbo is a group of interacting people bound by a common culture. Culture is the product of the people's interacting life which forms the basis for their interconnectedness with one another and their universe. The Igbo community remains an ostensibly functionalist society. Functionalism conceives society as structures of social relationships organized in terms of formal and informal rules that regulate human behavior. Social behavior is structured by certain values and beliefs that inform the social norms of the people. Norms are unwritten codes of conduct that structure social behavior, that is, specific guides to action as how a member of a particular society is expected to behave

at particular situations. Norms give rise to social expectations, making social relationship patterned and recurrent¹. They are products of certain values which define the worth of human actions that provides the overall beliefs about what is good and acceptable or what is bad and unacceptable by the society.

From the functionalist perspective, roles are assigned to individuals and such roles are governed by norms with a consequent social expectation. According to Haralambos et al, "Roles are formal or informal social positions with expectations of certain types of behaviours"² Hence a society is seen as consisting of structures, the sum total of normative behavior, and the social relationships which are governed by norms³. The different parts of the society are interrelated. Each performs a specific function not just for its survival as a separate institution but most importantly for the system as a whole. None of the institutions can thrive on its own but in dynamic relation with other parts that make up the society. The functionalists see society as a system whose interconnected parts are sustained by value consensus. Hence, for a society to survive there should be a certain minimal level of integration through social consensus expressed in certain various parts of the society. This is necessary as they believed that a certain degree of social order and stability is crucial for the survival of social systems and this they believe is made possible through shared value consensus which is capable of integrating the various part of society, providing the basis of social unity or social solidarity⁴. While the functionalist's view of society emphasis social function, order and progress; conflict perspectives highlight the fundamental difference and inequalities that are part and parcel of common and persistent feature of societies – which eventually lead to a change in the basic structure of society. Both Marxists and Feminists for example see society as divided by different racial, class, economic and gender interests resulting in conflicts of interest and crisis – which may not be easily

¹ Michael Haralambos, Martin Holborn, and Robin Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives* 7th Ed. (Hammersmith, London: Harper Collins, 2008): 8.

² Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, 8.

³ Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, 8

⁴ Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, 9.

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resolved. The Igbo community as a functional society thrives in social relationship and interaction of its members. The sociologist, Phil Bartle, in his article "What is Community" opines that community does not refer only to the its members, that is, the people that made up the community. He sees community as a social construct which exists beyond its members – "a set of interactions, human behaviours that have meaning and expectation, between its members... not just action but actions based on shared expectations, values, beliefs and meaning between individual"⁵ Bartle therefore, defines a community as "a pattern of human social interaction where those involved share in common certain values, norm, aspiration and interest"⁶. Despite the impact of colonial and neo-colonial experiences, the bulk of social life among the Igbo as with the many countries of African remains predominantly functional. The view of C. S. Momoh (2000) and Hountondji (1996) that that the critical and scientific attitude did not have a strong foothold in traditional societies all over the world⁷ may be considered true to some extent with regard to the Igbo community. For despite the deleterious nature of colonialism to superimpose western individualistic culture on the Igbo, the general way of life is still in touch with its traditional roots.

The way of life of the Igbo is predominantly communal, being marked by a unique culture which binds the people together with a common identity. Igbo culture is a common heritage, not just the physical or intellectual property of the individual. At the turn of modern period in Great Britain, Raymond Williams, one of the greatest critics of British culture, fought to rescue the concept of culture from the capitalist domination of an elite few. Prior to Raymond William's cultural criticism, T.S Eliot and other Nineteenth century Victorian elites arrogate culture to the intellectual and artistic domain of the upper class, claiming that the Working Class has no culture because they lack the learned manners that denote intricate etiquette. Williams insists that "The body of intellectual and imaginative work which each generation receives as its traditional culture is always and necessarily, something more than the product of a single class"⁸ Williams maintains that culture is the root of every community and is therefore a common heritage, a shared life and a common product of the people. A theory of culture, Raymond Williams says, is "A theory of relations between elements in a whole way of life"⁹ Williams insists that, despite the

conditions of a new industrialized modern life in Britain, culture is still a by-product of people's interacting life, and that is what is obtainable in Igbo community today. In line with Raymond Williams' argument, M. A. Onwuejeogwu, in writing about Igbo Civilization, posits that despite the incidents of Western modernity on Igbo traditional life, the Igbo still "share a common culture, basic culture centered around a common language, common institutions, common religions and cosmological beliefs"¹⁰ Igbo world view hinges on a cyclical paradigm, a continuum of the reality of beings, seen and unseen, referred to by Animalu as "the heavens above, the earth below it and the underworld beneath the earth"¹¹ or "the Physical, the spiritual and the abstract" as D.I Nwoga calls it. The continuum is exemplified in certain realities, which includes the eternal cycle of seasons, and names like Nnamdi and others which signify the communion with the ancestors (Eternal Returns). The Igbo belief in the connectedness of the heaven (enu), the abode of the Supreme Being; the earth¹² (uwa), the abode of the living, and the underworld (okpuluuwa), the above of the ancestors inform Igbo cultural norms – written and unwritten laws that are practical guides to action. Igbo world view is deeply religious, with a belief in the ancestors (Eternal Returns) that seal the cyclical conception of existence, an eternal communion of the spiritual and the secular world. In writing about traditional Igbo society, Isichei, Elizabeth notes that "To the Igbo, the Secular and the Sacred, the natural and the supernatural, are a continuum".¹³ Igbo morality, ethics and justice, predicated by the cyclical world-view, are expressed in the belief in and the practice of omenala, what Anele refers to as "the existential glue that binds the member of different Igbo communities together and provides a coherent philosophical framework which guides both the theoretical and practical activities of Ndi Igbo".¹⁴ omenala (what obtains in the land) is the summation of the complex system of beliefs, habits, values, normal, customs and traditions of the Igbo. It refers also to natural occurrence in the physical world, that is, the natural order of things as governed by the spirits that oversee the universe. Any contradiction in the natural law as enshrined in omenala is seen as abominable and attracts severe curse or the anger of the gods as well as

¹⁰ M. A. Onwuejeogwu, *An Igbo Civilization* (Benin, Nigeria: Ehiop Publishing Corporation, 1981): 14.

¹¹ A. O. E. Animalu, *Ucheakonam, Ahiajoku Lecture* (Owerri, Nigeria: Imo State Ministry of Information, Culture, Youth and Sports, 1990): 10

¹² Nwoga, D. I. Nkana Nzere: *The Focus of Igbo World View* (Owerri, Nigeria: Imo State Ministry of Information, culture Youth and Sports, 1984): 17.

¹³ Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd 1976): 24.

¹⁴ Douglas Anele, "Traditional Igbo Morality and the Challenge of Good Leadership in Contemporary Nigeria: A Philosophical Reflection", in *Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies* 5.4 (2012): 27.

⁵ Phil Bartle, "what is community? A Sociological Perspective", Web. 1).

⁶ Phil Bartle, "What is community?", 1

⁷ In Douglas Anele, "Traditional Igbo Morality and the Challenge of Good Leadership in Contemporary Nigeria: A Philosophical Reflection". *Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies* 5.4 (2012): 27.

⁸ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (2nd ed.): 1780 – 1950, Coleridge to Orwell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1987): 320.

⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, Forward, 1

communal stigma. Despite the impact of industrialized modern world, many Igbo believe in and uphold *omenala* as one of the means of avoiding social anarchy.

Igbo ethics places a high premium on life (*ndu*). Specifically, good life (*nduoma*) is highly valued and welcome among the people while bad life (*nduojoo*) is rejected as an unwholesome way of life. "Good" (*oma*) or "goodness" (*mama*) is an ideal expected from every member of the society. *Oma* conveys the idea of goodness and acceptability to an item it is attached – "Good God" (*Chioma*), "Goodness that exists" (*Mmadi*), "good Journey" (*Ijeoma*) etc. Good life is quantified not only by material possessions but most importantly by non-material possessions which include moral conduct, values, beliefs, quality of relationships and the individual's responsibilities toward preserving the cosmic order of beings. Above all, intelligence and sound reasoning (*akon'uche*) are indispensable for living within *omenala*.

Both Igbo world view and moral system prioritize communal existence. Although Igbo pragmatism welcomes individual hard work, exploits and achievements which is rewarded with titles and positions of honor, yet the life of the community is priced over and above that of the individual. The life of the community is regarded as more important because the individual, according to Ekei, "belongs to the group and his or her very survival depends on conditions which only the group can guarantee"¹⁵. It is the community that gives the individual his or her identity. Hence, as Eneke rightly observes "Although Igbo individualism is highly developed, it does not negate the concept of 'communal humanism'"¹⁶ For, according to Mbiti, in African Religious Philosophy, "To be Human is to belong to the whole community and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and festivals of that community"¹⁷. *Ohaka* (community is supreme) is therefore founded on the communal ideal of traditional Igbo morality, and is supported by aphorisms like "*Igwebuike*" (Multitude is strength). The concept, however, is being challenged in modern life because of fundamental inequalities.

The functionalist' sopinion that inequality and social stratification are derived from value consensus, and hence, are just, right and proper because they are expressions of shared values is becoming more and more unpopular and interrogated in contemporary Igbo society. For example, Parson argues that stratification systems like power and prestige differentials are based on value consensus and are therefore legitimate

authority since they are generally accepted as just and proper by members of society as a whole because "those in positions of authority use their power to pursue collective goals which derive from society's central values"¹⁸. Following Parson's argument, functionalists see power and prestige differential as essential for the coordination and integration of a specialized division of labor as something functional, that which benefits all the members of a society.

Contrary to the above view points, conflict theories as exemplified in Marxism and feminism reject the paternalistic gesture of functionalism and contend the assumption that inequality is legitimate and that it is based on a value consensus for the benefit of every member of society. They rather uncover the inhumanity and selfishness at the root of economic, color and gender differentials and insist on the rights of the individual. In like manner the functionalist view of traditional Igbo community is being actively interrogated following the fragrant abuse of power and privileges by people in positions of authority. Certain members of the community see themselves as victims of some other member predators, producing a lot of tension in the society. The essential traits of Igbo culture today, *Onuora Eneke* itemized as lack of centralization, egalitarianism and individualism¹⁹ are becoming popular and exhibited in a way that threaten communal existence.

The dramatic literature of the Igbo embodies the conflict between communality and individuality in modern Igbo society. It encompasses the traditional, colonial, neo-colonial and post-colonial Igbo life with all the conflicts and crisis of change that characterizes it. Igbo society, like all other societies is dynamic. Drama, as the most immediate of all the literary arts, responds spontaneously to observed changes and imbalance in the society. Igbo playwrights follow events as they unfold in the society, capturing them, recreating them and shaping the feature as they explore and criticize present realities to set the basis for the future. Much of the dramatic world of the Igbo seeks to preserve the basic fabric of the society while criticizing and interrogating injustice and inhumanity. However, most of the playwrights share the conviction of Eneke that much of Igbo artistic activities ensure the communal sense²⁰ and that "one of the functions of Igbo art is to moderate the individualism and egalitarianism and exploit them for the purpose of communal solidarity and identification"²¹ The play under study, *Wedlock of the Gods* ripples with issues of conformity to and contestation of '*Ohaka* (community is supreme). It is the

¹⁵ Chukwuma J. Ekei, Justice in Communalism: A Foundation of Ethics in African Philosophy, (Lagos: Realm Communication Ltd, 2001), in Douglas Anele, "Traditional Igbo Morality", 32).

¹⁶ OnuoraOssieEneke, *Igbo Masks: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre*. (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1987): 48.

¹⁷ John S. Mbiti, *African Religious [sic] and philosophy* (New York: Praeger Publisher, 1969): 2.

¹⁸ In Michael Haralambos, Martin Holborn and Robin Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, 21.

¹⁹ OnuoraOssieEneke, *The Igbo Masks*, 49.

²⁰ OnuoraOssieEneke, *The Igbo Masks*, 49.

task of the researcher to explore the basis and nature of the conformity and contestation in order to assist stem the tide of change sweeping through contemporary Igbo society for the sake of common good. The perspective for analysis is therefore sociological. Conforming and contending characters are placed within the culture of the society in which their social action originates and exists for proper understanding. According to Haralambos and Holborn, "To be sociological, a work must look beyond the individual to understand human behavior"²². The Method of analysis employed in this work is what the American sociologist, Wright C. Mills refers to as "Sociological Imagination": "The ability to study the structure of society at the same time as individual's lives"²³.

II. THE STRENGTH OF CONFORMITY IN WEDLOCK OF THE GODS (1972)

The conformity in Chukwuzulu Sofola's play, *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972) recreates the strength of a community to redeem itself. The dramatic world of the play is a traditional Igbo community, largely uncontaminated with the western culture ushered in by colonialism. It is a world inhabited by humans and spiritual forces in active interaction. The dramatic action centers on a young widow, Ugwoma, who is performing a three – month mourning and widowhood rites in honor of her late husband, Adigwu, a man she never loved. Before the expiration of the mourning rites, Ugwoma is found to be pregnant for another man, Uloko; the love of her heart with whom she had agreed to spend her life as his wife before she was forced to marry Adigwu. A taboo is committed, an offence that threatens the life of the community and all that it stands for. The rest of the play is the attempts by the community to redeem itself from the threats of the defiance by individuality. The world of the play is one where humans are in boundless interaction with spiritual forces. Ugwoma's taboo is therefore not only against the community but against the gods of the land who watch over the actions of men. It is a world of suspicion that believes in the potency of the powers of traditional and spiritual forces. Adigwu's mother suspects that his son's death is not ordinary: "Adigwu died of a swollen stomach. A man who dies like or a pregnant woman did not die a natural death. Somebody killed him"²⁴. It is a world of shared morality informed by value consensus that demands conformity; a social structure where the different social institutions like family, religion etc are expected to play their role for

common good. It is a traditional Igbo community without a visible presence of external, western life.

The action of the play is between the community and the individual, and it is fought in two levels, the physical and the metaphysical levels. The physical action is fought between the young lovers (Ugwoma and Uloko), on one side, and Odibei, Ugwoma's mother-in-law who is bent on avenging her son's death, on the other. The spiritual and metaphysical battle is between communal interconnectivity and continuity on one hand, and the rights of the individual on the other. It involves God (Chukwu) in Heaven, the humans and the deities (alusi) in the physical world and the spirit of the dead in the underworld represented by the wandering spirit of the dead Adigwu, roaming to reenter the physical world. In this existential battle for authority and relevance, Ugwoma and her lover Uloko, having committed a taboo, are pitched against not only the community but also the spirits (alusi) that oversee human affairs in the physical world. These spirits are the different deities that guard omenala and ensure its compliance. But Odibei, the mother of Ugwoma's late husband, Adigwu, is still in active communion with the community, the spirits in the physical world (alusi), Chukwu (God) in heaven and the spirit of her dead son roaming the underworld. Odibei therefore fights with formidable forces on her side and hence, stands firm and strong through to victory despite the aspersions cast on her actions as evil and wicked. It is the deities that infuse potency in the concoction with which she brings Ugwoma down to her tragic end. The young lovers, by committing a sin against omenala, cut themselves off from the only powers available to save them and turn themselves into outcasts. It is therefore a battle fought on unequal ground.

The characters can be divided into two, with Ugwoma and her lover, Uloko, on the side of individuality, and the other characters – Anwasia, Ugwoma's friends; Ugwoma's mother, Nneka; Odibei, Ugwoma's mother-in-law, Ugwoma's family and other members of the community on the side of community and its conformism. Ugwoma and Uloko stand alone when they committed a taboo; and worse still, remain stubborn and unrepentant. The tradition of the land is that Ugwoma, as a widow, mourns her husband for three solitary months, sleeping in the ashes by the fireside. At which period, she is considered unclean until she is purified after the mourning rites. She is therefore not supposed to let any man in until after three months when she will be handed over to her dead husband's brother to produce children for his late brother. Ogoli explains the omenala to her son, Uloko when she said: "A woman who loses her husband must not be visited by any other man until she has been cleansed. Any action against this is an abomination, and our gods

²² Michael Haralambos, Martin Holborn and Robin Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, 2.

²³ Wright C. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), in Michael, Haralambos, Martin Holborn, and Robin Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, 17.

²⁴ Zulu Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, (London: Evans Brothers limited, 1972): 6.

deal very severely with such offenders”²⁵. Ugwoma and Uloko are aware of this custom having been socialized in to the culture of their people. Ugwoma has started observing the traditional custom when it is noticed that she is one month pregnant for Uloko, her lover.

Ugwoma justifies her action by listening not to her parents or all others who symbolize community, but to her inside – her yearning and aspiration for freedom from social conformity. She never loves Adigwu. She was tied and wiped all through the way to a man she hates so that her parents could get the money needed badly for the treatment of her dying brother. Prior to the forced marriage, she has agreed to marry Uloko though he is not as rich as Adigwu. Hence, the three years of her marriage with Adigwu was like being in chain. She therefore sees Adigwu's death as God's intervention – a means to her freedom, and both lovers never wanted to miss the opportunity of getting married a second time. The lover's helpless anxiety is heightened by the tradition of transferring Ugwoma to Adigwu's brother, and that means an eternal bondage. They decide to assert their rights as individuals from the suffocating conformism of communal living. Ugwoma explains this pain to Anwasia, her friend, who vilifies her for her pregnancy: “You do not understand how my heart beats”. She says to her, “Because you were not tied like a goat and wiped along the road to a man you hated, you are not able to understand what my heart tells me”²⁶. As far as the two lovers, Uloko and Ugwoma, are concerned, Ugwoma's marriage to another man, Adigwu, never existed; it is null and void. In her social, physical life, she is married to Adigwu but her inner life, mental and psychological self belongs to Uloko. The Modernist's psychological theory of drama which locates truth in the subconscious supports Ugwoma's choice of inner truth or reality so also does interaction perspective on society which posits that the meaning of an action depends on the interpretation given to it by the actors or performers of the action. Hence, Haralambos et al write that “An understanding of action requires an interpretation of the meanings that the actors give to their activities”²⁷. Unfortunately, the young lover's psychological truth fails to establish its worth in an overwhelming functionalist society. Also their interactionist module is abhorred by other characters whose loyalty to the community is proverbial. Therefore, Uloko and Ugwoma stand alone, unsupported by parents, friends and families.

For Anwasia, Ugwoma's explanation is unacceptable; she explains:

You were forced to marry Adigwu, we all know that, but this pregnancy is not a good thing... it is not a

sign of good sense to look dry-eyed and clear-faced after such a forbidden act. No matter how much a woman loves a man, the gods forbid what you have done”²⁸.

Anwasia bases her argument on *omenala* (the way things are done in the community) and value consensus which binds people and all things together in a community. An Igbo adage has that “*Aha ahapuomenalamebeomenenu*” (You don't thrust aside the way things are done in the land and adopt the way things are done in the height). In his essay on traditional Igbo Morality, Anele Douglas points out the role of *akonauche* (intelligence and good sense of reasoning) in achieving *nduoma* (good life), which includes the individual's responsibility in preserving the kinship ties that bind individual to the community and the community with cosmic and spiritual forces. Anwasia argues that her friend's action does not typify *nduoma* (good life) because it lacks *akon'uche* (intelligence and good sense of reasoning), and must surely awaken not only communal stigma but the anger of the gods. Anwasia reiterates that “Never has it been heard that only a month after a man's death, his wife is already pregnant for another man”²⁹. Despite the indictment, Ugwoma remains undaunted and unrepentant: “It is one who never loved who thinks that way”, she retorts ... “let the moon turn into blood; let the rain become fire, ‘Ogwoma loves and Ogwoma will do it again!’”³⁰. Even Ugwoma's parents do not support her action. Her mother, Nneka, reminds her of the punishment for violating such taboo; “...a swelling of the body with water leaking from everywhere... Nobody will agree to treat you for fear they might also catch your curse... even after death, no forest will accept your body”³¹. Yet not even the gravity of the curse could shake Ugwoma. She insists on the sanctity of her action – her determination to assert her right and freed herself from the dictates of a conforming society.

Similarly, Uloko's maleness does not ameliorate the gravity of his abominable act of impregnating a widow in mourning. His mother, Ogoli, vilifies him for his stubbornness that landed him in violating a taboo: “You have planted a foul seed in the womb of a woman in mourning. You planted a poisonous snake in the womb that has not been purified. You have touched what belongs to a man whose spirit is still finding its way back to the world of the gods”³². Uloko is more resolute and defiant than Ugwoma. He holds onto his personal conviction of the need to defend his right. He has waited for those three years to have Ugwoma back and when the death of Adigwu seems to place her back in his

²⁵ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 36.

²⁶ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 9.

²⁷ Michael Haralambos, Martin Holborn, and Robin Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, 12.

²⁸ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 9.

²⁹ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 8.

³⁰ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 10.

³¹ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 819 – 20.

³² Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 42.

arms, he determines never to give way again. "I planted my son [not a snake] in Ugwoma's womb and I don't regret it. I don't regret it at all"³³, he explains to his mother.

The young lovers blame their parents for thwarting their love for each other. Ugwoma insists that her parents should not have forced her to marry a man she hates. She said to her mother: "You knew about me and Uloko. You could have given me away to him and received whatever money he could bring. But no, you were hungry for money because you had never seen money before. Now you tell me that you cannot walk on the road for shame"³⁴. Similarly, Uloko blames his mother for her inaction at the time Ugwoma was being taken away from her. It is a war of treading blames at which no party is ready to bulge. Nneka, Ugwoma's mother justifies her action by invoking the communal value consensus which justifies power and authority differentials as functional tools for social harmony. One of such legitimate authority is parental control of their children. Nneka invokes it to justify their action of giving their daughter in marriage to a man of their choice. She asserts: "Did we do anything that the land forbids? Is it not as others give their daughters away to husbands that we gave you away to one?"³⁵. She even indicts Ugwoma of being uncharitable and inconsiderate, taking into cognizance of the factors that necessitated her marriage to Adigwu, which is to raise the money needed to save her brother's life. "Any good daughter with a dying brother would have told her parents to give her away to a husband and use her bride wealth to cure her brother... we did the best the poor parents of a dying son could have done and all we now get from you is shame and disgrace"³⁶. Anwasia reminds Ugwoma that: "Our people say that a man's daughter is a source of wealth to him. You should have been happy that your money saved the life of your own brother"³⁷.

It is a game of circular reasoning in which each party sticks to its gun. The community, lying claims on tradition and customs that privilege communal life, the individuality clinging to the power of the self to assert its uniqueness. Anwasia, her friend and a powerful voice for the community, explains the general conformity to the custom: "it is a common thing that when a man dies his brother takes his wife and makes her his wife. This is what our people do. Everyone knows that"³⁸.

III. THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE TRAGEDY OF CONTESTATION IN WEDLOCK OF THE GODS

The playwright's methods resolve the conflict in the play as the tragedy of individuality and the triumph of

the community. The playwright's style is a testimony of her sympathy with the community and its demand for conformism. One of such outstanding techniques is the setting, Sofola's choice of a purely traditional society. The Igbo community she dramatizes is one uncontaminated by foreign ideology or culture. It is therefore expected that socialization would have molded people into the culture of the society. According to Ralph Linton, "The culture of a society is the way of life of its members, the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation"³⁹. Socialization is that process by which the young learn the culture of the people, and it is what is learnt that is shared, preserved and transmitted. Cultural deviance is least expected in such a traditional society. Hence, Ugwoma's and Uloko's deviance in the dramatic world of the play, is seen as unnatural and strange; and hence, generates communal sentiment and anger of the gods. It is the social context that heightens the impact of the young lover's action. Both the mother of Ugwoma and Uloko complain of the impact of stigmatization arising from their children's' action. As prominent proverb Igbo proverb has it that: "When a brother is dancing badly in the presence of observers, his relatives scratch their own eyes for shame". The young lover's contestation of a generally accepted customary practice brings down curse not only upon them but also on their families and the community at large. Nneka, Ugwoma's mother, complains bitterly: "I cannot walk on the road; I cannot go to the market without hearing whispers; I cannot swallow food without being choked. ...I cannot walk on the road for shame"⁴⁰. Sofola dramatizes the fact that reckless individuality cannot thrive in a traditional setting that does not yet encounter an alternative way of life. Because of the strong communal ties in such society, the community is not exonerated from the consequences of violating an abomination. Chigozie Nnabuihe, an Igbo scholar, teacher and cultural analyst, is right when he writes that: "It is strong belief among the Igbo that any person who violates the cultural norms of the people incurs the wrath of the deities... such contravention could cause a plague either on the offender in particular or the entire people in general"⁴¹. What Ugwoma and her love did amounts to what Nnabuihe calls "a crime against societal norm"⁴².

³⁹ Linton Ralph, "Present World Conditions in Cultural Perspectives", in R. Linton (Ed.) *The Science of Man in World Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945, in Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, 664.

⁴⁰ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 39, 18.

⁴¹ Chigozie Bright Nnabuihe, "On the relativity of Belief, Culture and Anti-culture: A case Study of the Igbo Society", in Udezuluigbo: *A Festschrift in Honour of Sam Uzochukwu*, edited by Iwulkwubuzo, Chinyere Ohiri-Aniche, and Chigozie Nnabuihe, (Lagos: Green Oliver Publishers, 2008): 386.

⁴² Chigozie Bright Nnabuihe, "On the relativity of Belief, Culture and Anti-culture", 387.

³³ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 43.

³⁴ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 19.

³⁵ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 18.

³⁶ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 18.

³⁷ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 9.

³⁸ (Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, p. 21).

Characterization is another powerful technique used by Sofola to castigate individualism and exalt conformism. The characters can be divided into two: the conformists, who are omenani loyalists, include all other characters except Ugwoma and her lover Uloko, and those who contest aspects of omenani, the social deviants are Ugwoma and Uloko. While the loyalists are equipped with material and non-material values to achieve nduoma (good life), the deviants lack both and are therefore doomed to nduojoo (bad life).

Ugwoma's character is flawed from the onset of the action. She displays lack of *akon'uche* (reasoning and good sense). She is portrayed as being naive and sentimental. She plays down the gravity of her abominable act with Uloko and believes that her God will save her, the same God (Chukwu) that she has offended. She insists she has done nothing wrong. Anwasia tries to talk sense into her. "Don't you see anything wrong in a woman being pregnant for another man while she is still mourning for her dead husband? Please act with good sense"⁴³. Sofola deliberately makes Uloko foolish, naive and senseless, thereby justifying his tragic end. He is represented as a man whose action stems from emotionalism. When, for example, Odibei, Ugwoma's mother-in-law apprehends him romancing a mourning widow in her late husband's room and orders him to leave, Uloko's reply, "I will not leave this house until Ugwoma goes home with me"⁴⁴ shows Uloko has lost all sense of shame in complete defiance to social norm. While Ugwoma plans for elopement to evade the punishment due to their violating a taboo, Uloko encourages her to "Forget the world. You are in my arms"⁴⁵; but it is impossible for them to forget the inclusive, communal world of traditional Igbo society. Imo Abang Emenyi rightly observes that Sofola locates their assertion within tradition because it is the basis for group experience⁴⁶. By castigating Ugwoma and Uloko through characterization, Sofola discredits their kind of non-inclusive, individualistic love, making the audience dissociate themselves from the young lovers. Their self-willed individualism is seen as a threat to communal life.

Sofola also castigates Ugwoma's family as a failed institution for bringing forth such a non-conformist individual. Ugwoma is represented as a problem child from a cursed family. In the meeting of the Onowu family summoned by Ibekwe, Ugwoma's father, the family members blame Ugwoma and her family for the calamity hanging in the air because of Ugwoma's abominable

act. Ike, Ugwoma's uncle, claims that "Ogwoma has been a problem to my brother from birth" and since she has decided to be a turn in her parents' flesh, "there is always a husband to lead her to"⁴⁷. Okolie on his own part vilifies Ibekwe, Ugwoma's father, for failing to lean on his people for financial help to treat his ailing son, instead of giving Ugwoma away to a man she hates: "It is true that a man's daughter is his source of wealth, but never have our people supported such action when there is another way to solve the problem"⁴⁸. Worse still, he alleges that Ugwoma is a spoilt child because his father failed to give her proper home training. "Ibekwe," he says, "let Ugwoma do anything she wanted to do. No hand ever dared strike Ugwoma"⁴⁹. Ugwoma therefore lacks home training, for "A child with proper home training does not receive men while the spirit of her dead husband wanders in the bush"⁵⁰. Okolie counters Ibekwe's claim of lack of cooperation from the family by insinuating a generational curse: "We [members of Olowu family] are not going to scratch ourselves blind because of one man's family. Ugwoma might have tried very hard to make herself different from your rotten family, but her family blood leaked out, and it is now smelling"⁵¹. The love between Ugwoma and Uloko can hardly be true love because it stems from a rotten root (their family).

Sofola also castigates their love as a product of youthful exuberance and reckless impatience. Udo, a close friend of Uloko's father, tries to talk good sense into Uloko's head as he blames him for his rash and hasty action: "A woman mourns her husband for three months. Ugwoma has completed two; couldn't you have waited for the remaining one month?"⁵² Anwasia confronts Ugwoma with similar question which pegs her action as wrongly timed when she asked Ugwoma: "Couldn't you have waited for the three months of mourning to pass before letting him in?"⁵³ Hence by making the lovers rash and impatient, Sofola subtly condemns the kind of love they express to each other as transience and sentimental. The researcher rejects, therefore, Daniel-Inim's assertion that Sofola explores the theme of deep love... in *Wedlock of the Gods*. In her own words: "Sofola explores the theme of deep love which admits no family or social barriers. This love is embedded in the relationship between Ugwoma and Uloko. Theirs is the love that holds in contempt the

⁴³ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 8, 10.

⁴⁴ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 15

⁴⁵ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 13

⁴⁶ James Adeola, *In their Own Voice* (London: James Curry, 1990): 143. Also qtd. In Emenyi, Imo Abang, "Between Aidoo's Feminism and Sofola De – Womanisation: Issues and Perspectives in African Gender Discourse", in *The Creative Artist: A Journal of Theatre and Media Studies*, 2.1. (2008): 75

⁴⁷ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 26, 28.

⁴⁸ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 28.

⁴⁹ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 27.

⁵⁰ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 23.

⁵¹ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 31.

⁵² Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 36.

⁵³ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 8.

norms and taboos of their community"⁵⁴. A love that holds its own people's norms in contempt cannot be a deep one; it is at best a romantic love which is artificial and fades easily, unable to stand the test of time, or at worst a fatalistic love doomed to end up in tragedy. An exclusive individualistic love can rarely thrive in a community ruled by communitarian spirit. Among Africans and the Igbo society in particular the assertion of Newell S. Booth holds sway; that "Man finds his fulfillment not as a separate individual but as a participant in a family and in a community"⁵⁵. Hence, to opine that Sofola in *Wedlock of the Gods* is on the side of women or individualism is a misunderstanding of the intricate dramatic techniques which determines the real meaning of a play. As Mark Schorer says, technique is the key to discovering the meaning of art.⁵⁶ Such interpretation of Sofola's play is an attempt to decipher feminist meaning from a wholly sociological work.

Conclusion

The socio-political context of Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* determines the resolution of the play. The play belongs to the first generation of Nigerian plays written to deconstruct the Eurocentric, imperialist ideology imposed on Africans through colonial experience. The Igbo, like other Nigerian communities are suspicious of some aspects of western culture that contaminates traditional African way of life. Contemporary African society and Ndi Igbo in particular see western individualism as a negation of African communal life. As the foremost Nigerian female playwright, writing at a time of cultural assertion aimed at redeeming the dignity of African culture, Sofola upholds the community over the rights of the individual. Plays like Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), J.P. Clark's *Song of a Goat* (1964) and *Another Raft* (1964) and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* (1970) are examples of Nigerian and African plays, which like Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972), dramatize the supremacy of African culture to which the Igbo belongs. Sofola's primary concern in the play is to recreate the tragedy which ensues from man's attempt to disrupt the concept of life as a cyclical and eternal communion of the living, the dead and the unborn. This is the African conception of tragedy recreated in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) when Elesin Oba delays to die and convey the spirit of the late Oba to the world of the

ancestors, thereby threatening the ties that bind the universe of the African world. Elesin's Praise-Singer laments the impending calamity: "There is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?"⁵⁷ The first generation of Nigerian playwrights uses their plays to preserve the cultural tradition.

Ugwoma and Uloko are tragic characters. By choosing to ignore the norms of their community, they opt to stand alone. "Our people say that the man who ignores his family is the one who stands alone in the rain"⁵⁸, says Ata, referring to the separatist attitude of not only Uloko and Ugwoma, but above all, that of Ugwoma's father, Ibekwe, who unilaterally decides to give away Ugwoma to a man she hates so as to raise money to heal his dying son, instead of consulting with his extended family. Ugwoma too, by her violation of a taboo, has equally pitched a tent against her people and must stand alone in the rain.

Modern Nigeria drama and the drama of the Igbo in particular interrogate a culture that disregards the rights of the individual. The African experience of modernity through colonial experience alters the basic nature of society with the introduction of an alternative way of way of life. Colonialism exacerbates and infuses inhumanity in the power differentials in traditional Igbo society, making change inevitable. Playwrights challenge the inequalities that are characteristics of modern Igbo society, especially those of class and gender. The exclusion of women from post-independence Nigerian literary and intellectual discourses necessitates counter hegemonic narratives capable of situating women in their rightful positions in the new society. In her study of the new women literature Omolola Ladele observes that: "The context of the implicit demoralization of women from the matrix of nascent nationhood or the proprietorial subsumation of all other voices within...masculinist episteme is particularly repressive for African women"⁵⁹

Igbo female playwrights respond to the subjugation of women by creating powerful, morally sound and assertive women capable of challenging social and gender inequality with the bounds of the bounds of cultural norms. In *Shadows on Arrival* (2012), Ezenwanebe endows the female protagonist, Egoyibo, with acceptable personal, spiritual and communal powers which enables her not only to contend but also change some retrogressive customs. Unlike Sofola who sets her play in traditional Igbo community, the dramatic

⁵⁴ Daniel – Inim, Praise C. "Theatre as a weapon for women's Rights and National Reforms: A Comparative Study of Some of the Plays of Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme", in *Theatre and Minority Rights: Perspective on the Niger Delta*, Edited by Asagba, Austin Ovigwe (Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd, (2010): 166.

⁵⁵ Booth, Newells, "An Approach to African Religion", in *African Religion: A Symposium*, edited by Booth, Newell S. (New York: NOK Publishers, (1977): 7

⁵⁶ Schorer, Mark, "Techniques as Discovery", in *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader* (London: Longman, 1972: 386.

⁵⁷ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1975): 11.

⁵⁸ Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*, 25.

⁵⁹ Omolola Ladele, "Deconstructing Masculinities, Feminist Reconstruction: A Reading of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*", in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 12.3 (2010): 463, DOI: 10.1080/1369801X.2010.516103.

world of Ezenwanebe's play is evident of modern influences which the protagonist employs to her advantage. However, modern Igbo women playwrights seek for change within the context of Igbo culture. It is the same kind of separatist radical feminist ideal of western women that necessitated the emergence of womanism as an alternative, familial, liberating module for oppressed African women. Africans and Ndiigbo in particular are averse to any ideology aimed at destroying the African cyclical cosmology which they see as the unique identity African world. Instead of aversion to family life and exclusion of the male gender from female's life, Igbo women artists and activists join other black women to advance complementary in social relationship based on equal opportunity, justice and equity for social re-orientation and transformation. Africans and Ndiigbo must work hard to evolve and maintain a unique, desirable identity capable of checkmating the automatising of human action and robotisation of social relationship in a technologized, postmodern world. Every Igbo should fight for the dignity of the human person but in a way that ensures that, "At best, individualism derives from the community, serves it, and generally acknowledges social responsibility...[that] individual dualism and communalism are both mediated for the good of the society"⁶⁰

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⁶⁰ Emekwe, OnuoraOssie, *Igbo Masks*, p. 49.

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