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Playwrights as Custodian of Cultural Values: The Igbo Cultural Experience in Emeka Nwabueze’s *Spokesman of the Oracle* and *The Dragon’s Funeral*

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Abstract

This paper analytically looks at Emeka Nwabueze’s attempts at a dramatic portrayal of Igbo cultural values as he functions as the eye, conscience and intelligence of the Igbo world. The paper examined the contexts of some cultural values embedded in the plays. The *Spokesman of the Oracle* and *The Dragon’s Funeral* among other perspectives are accurate expressions of the Igbo cosmology and revival of the peoples’ way of life and therefore proves that drama is influenced by stories, culture, social, moral issues, myths, and folktales. Explicitly, this analysis in assessing the aesthetics of Nwabueze’s creative ingenuity discovers that Igbo values and cultural sensibilities are incorporated in his plays; for instance, he expresses in the *Spokesman of the Oracle* the belief that Igbos are not careless about naming because they believe that names are tied to destinies. Such names are therefore, tied to the philosophy, psychology, religion or even the social background at a child’s birth. He uses powerful characterizations to depict that whatever a man sows is what he reaps. Ikemefuna is also crafted to expound the importance of children over barrenness. In *The Dragon’s Funeral*, he portrays the graphic nature of Igbo people’s use of proverbs and its clear lifelike or realistic description. He uses proverbs in his plays as a powerful aspect of culture to epitomize the realities of the Igbo people’s struggle philosophies, ambition and even their woes. He uses Okeugo, the Whiteman’s, surrogate to display the Igbo belief that ‘a man who shakes a tree trunk may shake his heart and head to extinction, hence his, funeral.’ Adaugo, a woman character expounds the status of Igbo women. *The Dragon’s Funeral* though a historical reconstruction of the past Aba women’s riot is used to depict the Igbo narrative technique. In evaluation of the selected plays, this study adopts context analysis as the preferred analytical approach.

Keywords: Culture, values, philosophy, Custodian, Proverbs
Introduction
Every human society all over the universe has its distinct cultural values. The Igbo people of Nigeria are not an exception. Igbo cultural values are indigenous Igbo ways and traditions the Igbo people engage in their various human activities. According to Igodo Eze, tradition is: a phenomenon that is connected with the past. It has to do with beliefs practices, ideas and norms that have been there through generations. It could be seen as laid down procedure or due process bequeathed to a people through experiences of the past (84).

There is no rigid difference between culture and tradition. From the above definition, tradition has to do with beliefs or behavior through generations while culture describes the value and life style of a people. Njideka Ebisi sees culture, not only as a tangible life style of people, but also as “the prevailing values and belief” (31). She stresses further, quoting Kottak, that anthropologists have emphasized the learning acquisition of social habits, capabilities, beliefs, lifestyles etc. (31).

One culture can be differentiated from the other through language, the kind of food the people prefer, their dressing pattern, the way they beat their musical instruments and their music in general and other values. For instance the Igbo people of Nigeria place much value on marriage, to this effect; whenever a girl or a boy reaches the age of marriage his family becomes worried to avoid insinuation from the neighbours. They value children and pray, especially during the marriage ceremony, that the couple be blessed with children.

Emphasis is also placed on the training of the children to become successful adults. In the upbringing of these children, every hand is always on deck; the neighbours and the passersby are obliged to advice and control the child to behave well; because the Igbo people believe that a child belongs to all. Therefore they believe in accurate moral upbringing so as to raise high moral values for their offspring.

The Igbo are egalitarian philosophers; their belief in human equality makes them to train their children to work hard to free oneself from financial dependence which can convert a person to another’s slave. They, especially, train their boys to work hard to avoid living beggarly and girls to be self-sufficient to free them from being a prey or be influenced and controlled by a male counterpart who can easily engage them in pre-marital sex to get material gains which may result to the birth of a bastard. An illegitimate birth is not a welcome issue in Igbo land but if it occurs by mistake, Igbo people don’t encourage any harm on the innocent child; the child belongs to the parents of the girl because no dowry was paid before such birth so the man has no grounds to claim ownership of the child. This kind of circumstance can affect the child’s well-being and even his identity. That is why, in Igbo dispensation, the state of child’s birth influences his/her name. Naming system is another important value among the people of Igbo of Nigeria. The name of a child can be influenced by the
circumstances surrounding the child’s birth.

There are some actions prohibited by the Igbo people for fear of immediate harm from a supernatural force. Some of the prohibitions are imposed by social customs while others are imposed by nature itself. Such offences are incest – sexual relationship between people who are closely related such as between a brother and sister, father and daughter, mother and son, having libidinal pleasure with in-laws and uncles; widow and her friend during her mourning period, etc. Other taboos include: women climbing palm trees, suicide, bestiality, all forms of same sex attraction, beating a pregnant woman by the husband, and so on. Those caught in the web of such abominations in Igbo land must go for cleansing or face some serious repercussions.

However, Igbo culture and values have undergone a lot of changes in the past and are still going on. The velocity of the changes which is evidenced in the abandonment of her norms and values in preference to the Western cultural values places Igbo culture on a weak pedestal as facing a very serious problem of extinction because the Igbo people are becoming more English than the English people. Some of these taboos are exposed by Emeka Nwabueze in his *Spokesman of the Oracle and Dragon’s Funeral*.

**Theoretical Framework**
Content analysis is a theoretical approach to the study and the interpretation of texts. According to Wikipedia, context analysis is a research method for studying documents and communication artifacts, which might be texts of various formats, pictures audio or video (website). Therefore, this paper uses the approach to examine the patterns of Nwabueze’s plays in a replicable and systematic manner to discover his use of Igbo people’s cosmology. This involves systematic reading of his plays to discover areas of interest for accurate analysis of his works as he chronicles the value system of the Igbo people. The reliability of this approach is that different scholars can find the same values. This approach is perfect for interpreting texts and in many ways evaluates texts authorship and authenticity. Political scientist Harold Lasswell formulated the core question of content analysis in its earlymid 20th Century mainstream version. It was also strengthened by Bernard Berelson.

**Synopsis of Emeka Nwabueze’s *Spokesman of the Oracle***
Igbo scholars, especially the playwrights, should act as custodians of the people by recognizing the need to present balanced and authentic facts about the Igbo values as a way of protecting them and bringing them to the forefront globally. It is also a way of liberating African literature from the cultures of European literature. For this reason, Nwabueze approaches the assignment by focusing his work from a thoroughly Igbo viewpoint or perspective. His enterprise becomes an incontestable reservoir of values and sensibilities of the Igbo man as he imprints on his work the flavour the Igbo people. For that reason, most of Nwabueze’s works are set in Igbo land. It is impossible to deny one’s nature. That is why according Nicholas Gnene: “Natura in expellas forca, tamen usque recurrent”
which means that “you may throw nature out with a pitch fork, she will return nonetheless (20).

The play is set in Igbo area of Nigeria and opens with Chidi Okafor with his sterile wife, Oyibo. Chidi used to be a teacher but later became a business man. They were discussing about Ikem, a child they picked eighteen years ago from the pit toilet. In his youthful exuberance, Chidi impregnated one of his students, Nneka but could not marry her. The result of that pregnancy is Ikem whom she dumped into the school pit toilet and escaped to Lagos out of frustration. As the Principal of the school then, when the baby was discovered, Chidi tried to trace the mother but couldn’t. He goes through the normal process of adoption with the social welfare and adopts the baby. He resigns as a Principal for business, considering his hopes to get more money to command more respect from the society because, to him, his immediate society doesn’t respect intellectuals but money bags. He really gets the money but languished in immoral relationship with women like Nkoli. Nkoli is wild and even hopes that Chidi would discard his wife and marry her. During one of their passionate relationship, Chidi discloses the existence of Ikem and his identity to Nkoli in his emotional euphoria. Nkoli then searches and reveals the secret to Nneka when she failed to get what she wanted from Chidi.

Nneka convinces her father that they must involve Okeke Nkpo, the spokesman of the oracle to perform some rites which would free her from the atrocity she committed by throwing the child into the pit. She makes his father, Mr. Amadi to believe that the gods must be appeased for the sacrilege. Mr. Amadi quickly searches and locates Chidi’s house and drops the news like a bombshell that scatters the news like a bombshell that scatters the very centre of Chidi’s family and even Ikem himself who has already been admitted to study medicine in the university.

Nneka arrives to claim Ikem. This coincides with pyjamas party where Nneka is tempted to sleep with Ikem without knowing it; thus committing incest, a taboo which now actually needs cleansing. Perhaps that’s why when Ikem heard the truth of his identity and his action with Nneka who turned to be his mother he becomes neurotic.

Igbo Values and Cultural Sensibilities Incorporated in the Play

Igbo Naming System: Nwabueze uses his play to express the Igbo naming convention. He expounds that Igbo people are not careless about naming because they believe that names are tied to destinies. An Igbo name may be tied to philosophy, religious, psychology, or even social or economic background of the parents or environment or even the circumstances that surround his birth. Some Igbo names are responses to mockery suffered by parents before the child’s birth, for instance; caricature or scorn they experienced from the neighbours or enemies during their barren days. For instance Ikemefuna, one of the notable characters in the play is crafted to express the importance of children over barreness but symbolically stands to express that the power the mother exerted to carry the pregnancy should not be
wasted. At the same time Chidi and Oyibo the childless couple could also be praying that the power they used in rescuing and training him should not be lost because the Igbo people devote much time and money in training a child. In fact, they indulge in excess training for their offspring. That is why a child is still under the custody of the parents until he gets established to fend for himself. They also believe that after training a child, he/she is expected to fend for the parents at their old age. In the play, Chidi rescues the baby Ikemefuna from the pit toilet where Nneka, a student, dumped him believing that he is dead. He wanted a child he would train who would in turn fend for him in old age. Chidi resigns as a Principal taking the child Ikemefuna to the East with the hope of avoiding the appearance of his mother in future. Little did he know that the child is the result of his illegitimate relationship with his student from the same area. But changing location didn’t help him because the information he revealed to his immoral partner, Nkoli who, disappointed in him uses the information to revenge. Every condition of life is bound in an orderly and harmonious sequence. The Igbo people believe that whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap. And he who puts his hand in the fire must suffer be burnt Nkoli uses the careless information released by Chidi about Ikemefuna’s identity to punish him. She searches for Nneka tells the story; that her thrown-away child was rescued by Chidi and that his name is Ikemefuna. She becomes excited; a child she taught would have rotten in the pit toilet. Nneka picks the baton of vengeance tells her father an incredible story about Okeke Mkpo, the spokesman of the oracle. She says the spokesman is her only last hope of saving herself from an abomination she committed by throwing her born child into a pit toilet. She begged that the child, Ikemefuna should be sought after and brought home so that she would be free from the wrath of the gods. The father wasted no further time. He confronted Chidi:

Amadi: My daughter returned from Lagos. She was very sick. Her whole body was swelling and you know what that means. It means that she had committed an abomination, that she had desecrated the whole land, that the gods are punishing her, that the whole family stands the danger of being destroyed as well ..... she has Visited all the big hospitals in Lagos but none was able to help her. She came back to the village and went to see Okeke Mkpo.

Chidi: Who is Okeke Mkpo?

Amadi: He’s the spokesman of the oracle. The oracle of Agbala. He’s the greatest diviner in the land .... Mr. Okafor this man prescribed a lot of sacrifices to be performed and cleanse the land, which my daughter has desecrated by her shameful behaviour. It was
then that she came to me and narrated the whole thing and begged me to help her trace the son she had thrown away to help in the last bit of cleansing as prescribed by the oracle. .... My daughter’s life is still hanging in the air and the whole family stands the risk of destruction by the gods (33-34).

At the end, the above story becomes a fabrication; Nneka framed the story in connection to the spokesman of the oracle just to get her father connected to help her rescue her son so that her power of pregnancy will not get lost (Ikemefuna), in spite of the fact that she threw him away at birth. Now the child has been revealed to be alive she shamelessly goes for him. But she lost it all at the twist of events by the incest she carelessly committed by unknowingly sleeping with the same boy she bore but threw in the pit toilet. It is now that the actual cleansing is needed. To this, Amadi speaks with disappointment about the abomination:

Amadi: it’s the type of thing that is not spoken with the mouth, the type that makes humanity spit their rejection and block their ears. You see, we need to join hands to cleanse the two families; else the gods would haunt us forever. It’s something that is forbidden, something that stakes the ear (79).

The forbidden action played by Nneka almost swallowed her name. To Igbo people, Nneka means that mother is supreme. This is a fact among them. Despite her attitude in the play, the playwright depicts that she would have lost the power of her name by leading a careless life. Tradition holds that a child in Ikem’s circumstance should trace his roots. That is why; the oracle through the spokesman, Okeke Nkpo says Ikem should go to his mother’s family because no dowry was paid by Chidi on Nneka’s head before Ikem’s birth. If he fails to do so, Amadi’s family will be thrown into jeopardy.

The author uses the part played by Chidi in the play to express that there is God or rather God exists (Chidi). It is because of this fact that God exists that makes Ikemefuna who is thrown into a toilet pit containing poisonous human waste to survive in spite of its impossibility. The name Ikemefuna stands as symbol that providential power sustains and guides human destiny. By human plan, Chidi impregnates, abandons; Nneka bears and abandons; but providence says he would be alive to be a medical doctor. It culminates to the fact that God’s creation can never be wasted hence the name Ikemefuna. This is a part of Igbo norm and value system. Other characters in Nwabueze’s *Spokesman of the oracle* are crafted to act according to Igbo norms and values.

As an Igbo custodian he portrays the Igbo people’s dislike for bad company by displaying how Ikemefuna’s bad companions lured him to Pyjamas party which gave rise to incest. His bad
companions also lured him to drink alcohol which he has never attempted until that party. He confesses:

Ikm: Mum, I never planned to sleep outside. I just want to keep the company of my friends for a while. It was my first time of attending such a party … there were no soft drinks there, not even wine, only beer, rum, and whisky. So I picked up a can of beer, and decided to keep sipping it till I was ready to come back home. Then somebody put some rum or whisky into it. A lot happened there … (21).

Another Igbo taboo he raised was incest and throwing away a child at birth. These are some of the most abominable taboos in Igbo land because children from such relationship suffer genetic disorders. They are at risk of congenital disorders such as congenital deafness, death, and developmental and even physical disability. Incestuous relationship especially the one that exists between a parent and an offspring as Nneka and Ikem in the play; or between siblings is almost globally forbidden.

At the same time, the play highlights promiscuity and condemns it. Both male and female promiscuity are condemned. Nneka, the real mother, throws the baby away while Chidi “rejected him while he was still in the mother’s womb, denied his real mother and caused her to throw him away” (49). The playwright aims to portray that both promiscuity and child abandonment are loaded with disgraceful consequences in Igbo traditional society.

Nwabueze also highlights the metaphysical nature of the Igbo in their special regard for oracles. The spokesman of the oracle, Okeke Mbo is highly respected because people whether they like it or not yield to the verdict of the oracle.

Synopsis of Nwabueze’s The Dragon’s Funeral

The play’s epic style is arranged in movements. It embodies the dramatic history of the famous Aba Women’s’ riot of 1929. The play opens with a folk song of women on an Orie market stalls as they remembered the woman who led the Aba women riot during the colonial era and happened to own a stall in that very Orie Market. The name of fiery leader was Adaugo Nwanyerenwa. The village griot, Mazi Ekwedike attracted the market women who insinuated him to recall the story of the woman’s exploits. The playwright arranges the griot’s story in such a way that the revolt comes to the climax with the process of holding trials against chief Okeugo, Chief Idike and Chief Adaka. The main man who attempted to impose taxes on women was Chief Okeugo. He becomes an escape goat; is judged and found guilty by the British colonial judge. His staff of office and royal cap was profaned by women. Other supporters of colonial administration who had their share of the women’s disgrace were Dr. Hunter of the Aba General Hospital and Teacher Emeruwa. The District Officer was forced to amend the women’s’ taxation while
Chief Okeugo was sentenced to five years imprisonment with hard labour.

Recognition of Cultural Values in The Dragon’s Funeral
Use of Proverbs: Proverbs are marked by their graphic nature; by clear lifelike or realistic description. The Igbo people’s literature ought to distinguish their very existence. And the existence of a people is hidden in their experiences, struggles, philosophies ambitions, sensibilities, delights, and their woes. Proverbs stand as the most powerful aspect of culture that epitomize the above realities; hence Okoh states that:”Proverbs essentially reflect the realities of the society that coins them” (124). Nwabueze recognizes this fact that “proverbs are an essential ingredient in African speech and culture. They are also powerful carriers of traditional wisdom, social and mores” (Akporobaro, 78). He therefore used it without flinching even to a fault in The Dragon’s Funeral. All the speeches made by the principal characters were not made without proverbs. Right from the first Movement even to the last, proverb abounds. He uses them in a model of compressed language to fulfill their social and communicative functions though in a very complex way. He uses them to prove his characters as accomplished speakers. Ekwedike is one of such accomplished speakers. Addressing Adaugo Nwanyerenwa, ‘The daughter of Ojini Nwanyerenwa, the valliant’s jaw that grows gray beards” (6), he applies a proverb: “the snake will always give birth to something that resembles it” (6). Ojim, Adaugo’s father is metaphorically compared to as the snake that gave birth to Adaugo who resemble him.

In the same Movement One, Ekwedike wanted to start the narration but wanted to share the story in the manner of his ancestors, he says: “The chameleon said that even the wild harmattan fire will not make him change the dignified steps of his ancestors” (8) Ekwedike makes another proverbial statement referring to the aftermath of the uprising, the destruction of Chief Okeugo, the dragon:

Ekwedike: Daughters of my ancestors, our people say that it is not changing into a lion that is hard but getting the tail of a lion. Women of my beautiful land, they say that the offspring of a tiger will never eat grass, that kolanut last longer in the mouth of those who value it! … That day when the government pronounced judgment on him, we bit our fingers, then we realized that no matter how well a mad man is cured, traces of madness will always remain to betray him before strangers … when the grandfather sets with his grandchild too many time by born fire, the little boy will have the impetus to tell the old man: “I know the colour of your scrotum” (10).

As a bona fide Igbo man, Ekwedike in handling the character of Chief Okeugo, the white man’s surrogate in his failure to handle his office well which finally consumes him; he applies a wider category of figurative and aesthetically
conceived forms of expression which are all in a proverb to softly express his views about the egocentric, selfish, and power drunk stooge:

Okeugo was a wise man. But he did not realize that a child that shakes a tree trunk is merely shaking his head and heart. A land that wants to grow horns would be heavy at the elbows. Our people say that the man whose strength intoxicates him will one day surrender that strength to the burial mat. That the pleasure of madness is secret concealed and enjoyed by the mad men alone, that a goat lying on the floor is lying on its own skin. (17).

The proverbial expression above not only places Ekwedike as a philosopher, as having information, as having understanding that comes from Igbo cultural experience but also as a man imbued with conscientious details of his people’s sensibilities. His proverbial expression depicts that Chief Okeugo is neither meticulous nor knowledgeable because he refers to him as a chief who can only try the impossible thing as to shake the ‘tree trunk.’ A child’s imbecile mind would have told him that he lacks the ability to move a tree trunk and even if he does, his heart would be at risk. This explains Chief Okeugo’s poor ability in dealing with people which finally disgraced him. There is always a fall after an exaggerated pride or hubristic confidence.

The playwright again uses his mighty man-woman character to express his truth of experience. These truths are expressions and are empirical facts derived from people’s cosmology. Adaugo’s speech reveals the truth hidden in the distasteful belly of the colonial government she is reacting against.

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

Aduago’s speech above not only expresses the truth of experience but an observation in a strikingly figurative language. Her speech strongly defines her status, the context, the era, and circumstance on the ground that gave impetus to the speech. Speeches are very much determined by socio-geographical experience. The playwright weaves her speech to depict the nature of imagery as
expressed in the era of the riot which also conveys the nature of the Igbo natural environment. The repertoire of imagery in her speech, for instance, the dust in her speech is changed to the evil ‘men’ and finally explained as the government. Moreover to escape into the anti-hole means to die since anti-hole is the abode of the dead where the masquerades are believed to live. And masquerades are believed to be our dead ancestors who come to relate with the living. Of course her speech is aimed at arousing her fellow women to mutiny. The women were already responding to the uprising as they shouted their approbation: “Nooo” (18).

Igbo Narrative Technique: The Dragon’s Funeral is a historical reconstruction of Aba women’s riot in the past. The playwright now uses Ekwedike to tell the story which is recounted using performance. Before he starts the story, he needs to arouse the interest of the audience. According to Emenanjo, “a story is usually introduced or concluded with conventional formula which vary from place to place in Igbo land” (Xii). The playwright, made the narrator to adhere to the convention which is suggested to be from Aba area – the setting of the play.

Ekwedike: Akuko a obrukwa m gbapuru gi afo a! (Twice)
(This story, if I ever mis-tell you)

Women: (chorusing) Nda!!

Ekwedike: Ndikwa n’bo (twice)
(May I fall into the pit)

Ekwedike: M’obughi m gbapuru gi afo a (twice)
(But if I don’t mis-tell you)

Women: Nda (twice)

Ekwedike: M fekwe m u’bo (twice)
(May I cross over the pit)

Women: Nda (Twice)

Ekwedike: Akuko lee!

Women: (Chorusing)

Akuko obodo lee (the story of town)
Agu lee, ejije a wu nke nta
(This drama is light)
Ojiri ekete kuru mmiri (If I fetch water with a basket)
Ndikawa m n’bo (May I fall into the pit)
Nda, Nda !! (chorus)

The above lively repartee is terminated as the story teller tells the audience the title of his tale or what the story is all about as is the culture of most Igbo story tellers.

Ekwedike: Daughters of my ancestors, I will start with the fate of a man like me. The fate of the self-proclaimed dragon whose funeral the woman celebrated. What happened to the dragon is a story that is still told in the homes of the valiant, and will soon be told in moonlight nights. It’s the aftermath of the uprising, the destruction of Chief Okeugo, the dragon.
Chei. What happened to that man speaks the language of our ancestor.

Women: Our ears are wide open.

In some parts of Igbo land, the conventional opening remarks may not be as elaborate as that illustrated above by Emeka Nwabueze.

As an Igbo man and a custodian of the culture, Nwabueze applies the naming system of characterization in his play. Some of the characters in the play include Adaugo, Ekwedike, Chief Okeugo, Obidie Uloma, and the rest. These names help to establish that the play is set in Igbo with all Igbo inclinations and cultural norms. For instance Adaugo is referred to as Achalaugo, an Igbo way of describing a beautiful woman. Ekwedike describes her as a “tall thing like that, the kind you don’t see on the road every day, the kind of people, who know how to appreciate feminine beauty, call Achalaugo (7). The same Ekwedike calls her “Adaugo umugbala, nwanyi manari ibe ya…” (10).

To highlight the Igbo market days, the playwright uses Ekwedike. He says: The day the dragon met his funeral was Orie day. Orie is one of the four market days in Igbo land. These and other cultural values were highlighted by the playwright to prove that he keeps, protects, and propagates the Igbo values and culture.

**Conclusion**

Igbo culture and values are undergoing a lot of changes in the past and are still going on. The speed of the changes is evidenced in the abandonment of Igbo norms and values in preference to the Western cultural values. This places the Igbo culture on danger of obliteration because Igbo people prefer the English ways of life to their own. Emeka Nwabueze is a bona-fide son of Igbo land and a custodian of his refuses to fold his hands while the Igbo culture dies. In his effort to achieve this, he presents the life and times of his people pragmatically; exposing some of the customs, values, and abomination of the Igbo people; and these are judiciously analyzed in this paper.

**Works Cited**


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