

# **BETWEEN DIDACTICISM AND PRAISE-SINGING: FOLKLORISTIC DIMENSIONS IN NELLY UCHENDU AND IKEM MAZELI'S ORAL PERFORMANCES**

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## **Abstract**

There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria nay Africa is endowed with diverse cultural heritages. One of the evidences of this rich cultural heritage is her abundant oral tradition. Folklore which is identified as one of the significant genres of oral literature through which cultural and moral norms are instilled into the people appears endangered in contemporary times due to its oral form. Folklore is faced with the danger of extinction as modernization seems to distract the younger generation who are unduly influenced by Western ideology and lifestyle from paying adequate attention to those cultural materials. This poses a threat to the preservation, and transmission of oral literature in this jet age. Oral performers therefore act as important vehicles for the sustenance, development, transmission and spread of this unique form of cultural knowledge by adapting oral literature into their performances. The oral performer therefore utilizes his artistic prowess and poetic license during an adaptive process to make creative inputs that can help to fully explore, exploit and expose the aesthetics potentially present in the performances. Through this approach, folklore has retained its oral form. This study aims at evaluating the folkloristic dimensions in contemporary oral performances by analyzing the works of two Igbo oral performers; Nelly Uchendu and Ikem Mazeli. The creative inputs and unique performance aesthetics in their adaptation of oral literature are critically examined. Content analysis approach of the qualitative methodology was adopted for the study. The efficacy and aesthetics of the performances are tested on Ukala's Folkism theory. Library and internet materials provided additional data needed for the study. Findings reveal that while didacticism which is a core distinguisher of the African folk tradition is consciously retained in the performance aesthetics of the two performers,

praise-singing is creatively woven into their performances to enrich the aesthetics, making them contemporaneous, relevant as well and commercially viable. The study recommends that the oral performance tradition should be sustained as a means of preserving and promoting the unique cultural values of Africans

**Key Words:** Didacticism, Praise-singing, Folklore, Oral Performance, Folkism

## **Introduction**

Despite efforts by literary, sociology and anthropology scholars to ensure that African traditions and culture are properly written and safely documented, the most effective means of transmitting traditional cum cultural codes and practices of the people, especially, oral literature, has been through verbal means. Alex Asigbo explains that oral literature involves verbal elements accompanied by auditory, visual as well as musical elements that make it ensemble in practice. In general, it can be said that folklorists are more fundamentally interested in practices and performances in which artfulness and everyday life intersect through a verbal medium (“Oral Performance as Siren ...” 23). Hence, scholars study, document and seek to understand a large number and wide variety of verbal cultural expressions that can broadly be characterized as oral performances in the form of songs, dance, and histrionics. Most cultural expressions in oral form are realized through the performance of one sort or the other. Performance is extremely relevant in folkloristic. Thus, through the use of various artistic styles, cultural codes, and linguistic textures, the oral performer artfully designs and presents an aesthetically appealing folk narrative while making creative inputs that make it contemporaneous. Hence, Ode Ogede defines “oral literature, or more properly put, orature (as) the art and craft of imaginative verbal expression. It refers to any creative or expressionistic use of

the spoken language to produce a work of art similar to those of (written) literature (1)".

Folk literature or what has been more widely referred to as folklore has been regarded as one of the most popular forms of oral narrative which originates from beliefs, culture and customs of people and passed on from one generation through verbal means. Folklore often classified as myths, legends, songs, stories and so on has been studied by scholars in terms of their form, content and function. According to Chiji Akoma, folklore is an important genre in African literature which:

its creation and transmission are so inextricably interwoven that its actual enactment and delivery is the most significant aspect of its nature or form, as an aesthetic experience. It invariably inheres theatricality, since it is always accompanied by action, its true nature or artistic success rests as much with the verbal content as with its overall presentation. This means that in addition to its structure and content, its ultimate quality depends on elements of performance such as dance, songs, mime, gestures etc. (227 - 8)

Furthermore, Asigbo sums up the role of folklore and the essence of folk performance to include, the preservation of culture, explanation of natural phenomena, transmission of salient historical and social information, inculcation of ethics and moral education as well as entertainment ("Oral Performance as Siren ..." 21).

Folklores are often considered to be meant for children, because of their seeming adventurous and fantastical composition which makes them appealing and helpful in developing the cognitive, critical and linguistic skills of a child. This does not however imply that themes in folklore are not beneficial to other ages in society, like the youth and the elderly. Lessons inherent in these stories and songs such as exaltation of virtue, condemnation of vice and triumph of good over evil, reward or punishment for

good or bad actions respectively are relevant in correcting various ills that cut across all strata of the society. According to Dan Agu, every tribe, race and people utilize folklore in their oral performances which has helped in retaining as well as in handing down interesting and captivating stories, poems, songs and other oral dramatic renditions from one generation to the other (qtd. in Ibekwe 345). The Igbo land is one of the culturally distinguished regions in Africa due to its rich repertoire of folk performance traditions. Its people attach great importance to folk literature, music or performance because of its expressive and utilitarian values. Folk tradition is woven into the lives of the people, it bonds them together and is part of their existence. It is a core socio-cultural unifier which sometimes possesses direct religious and supernatural control over a people through which moral order within that society is maintained. Meki Nzewi affirms that folk music or lore:

... in all its elements and application has latent psychological, physical and spiritualizing essence; it is an ethnic communion that portrays group spirit, thought, myth, and aspiration. At the same time, it is the bond, the umbilical cord that links the group with the ultra-terrestrial forces whose potencies are made manifest in various awe-inspiring and unpredictable ways in their lives. (qtd. in Ibekwe 346)

Like in some other cultural enclaves within Africa, the essence of oral performance in a typical Igbo society is often bipartite. It is both for didactic purposes as well as for praise-singing. In other words, education and entertainment - the core essences of art – are blended into most oral performances. This work therefore investigates the pedagogical and entertainment values of oral performance. Using Nelly Uchendu and Ikem Mazeli's oral performances as focal points, this work also highlights the performative qualities and theatrical efficacy of the folk tradition. It evaluates the artistic blend of praise-singing and

didacticism while the performers draw endlessly from the resource pool of the folk tradition.

### **Art, Society and Folk Performance in Contemporary Context**

Oral tradition has been a resource pool from where creative artists of both African and non-African descent draw inspiration. Thus, folklore becomes a yielding tool in the hands of the oral performer in enriching his artistic enterprise. The oral performer in his ingeniousness ornaments the folklores with lyrics, instrumentations and other performative elements to make the performances rhythmic, didactic, aesthetic as well as ensemble. Isidore Okpewho while affirming the foregoing asserts that “since (such lore are) not simply told but re-enacted with due resources, histrionic movements, and so on, the result is not simply poetry but dramatic poetry” (116). Therefore, with the adaptation of various forms of orally performed poetry to contemporary contexts, oral literature has been able to survive as a viable literary or as Okpewho contends, dramatic genre.

Researchers have continued to carry out in-depth evaluations of the folk performer’s use of oral art to ascertain his retention of the various cultural markers existent in the lore within a performance context. Ethnomusicologist, Nnamdi Onuorah-Oguno in an interview with the researcher contends that oral literature is gradually going into extinction due to factors like modernization, and urbanization which has made transmission of oral literature to the younger generation in contemporary times difficult. This is why, according to him, the artist “is expected to maintain the identity of the folksongs because when you modify a folksong to an extent that the people that own the folksong cannot identify it again, it becomes an aberration” (personal interview). In response to Onuorah-Oguno’s concerns, oral performers like Nelly Uchendu and Ikem Mazeli weave folklore and songs into their renditions embellished with praise-singing which is a creative way of sustaining the business dimension of the art. Scholars like

Asigbo bifurcate folk performance into two. In a separate submission, he argues that oral performance can either function as “therapy” or as “siren”. In “Oral Performance as Therapy ...”, Asigbo explains that music possesses the power to treat physical, mental and emotional ailments while further asserting that the therapeutic role of music transcends physical healing. Using Perry-Como Okoye’s music as a reference point, he insists that oral performance as therapy concerns “music for inner orientation and spiritual alignment ... (since such) music goes beyond the mundane to the supermundane” (76). To him, performers such as Perry-Como Okoye qualify as authentic adaptors of their folk tradition hence their role as therapists.

Some of Ikem Mazeli’s performances may fit into the description of music with metaphysical essence especially his masquerade songs, “egwu mmuo”, culled from the repertoire of masquerade songs of the Onitsha people. He uses certain esoteric lingo to praise spirits and heroes thus creating a chthonic path through which cosmic totality is invoked. As a woman, Nelly Uchendu’s music can be said to exert therapeutic influence only on temporal issues since the themes in some of her songs revolve around Obedience, Moral Decency, Love, Honesty, Patriotism and the like. Elsewhere, Asigbo analyzed performers who are “forced ... into peddling their art for the pleasures of the highest bidder” as exemplified by Ozoemena Nwa Nsugbe. Such performers tend to commodify their art through excessive praise-singing hence Asigbo labels them as “sirens” (“Oral Performance as Siren ...” 19). Although there are traces of praise-singing in Nelly Uchendu’s music, especially her live performances, there is an ample and robust manifestation of mercantile art in Mazeli’s music. Mazeli’s generous and vigorous praise-singing patterns appear compelling hence one is being persuaded to also classify some of his oral performances as “siren”.

Among Africans, especially the Igbo ethnic group, a talented oral performer is one who artistically employs folklore to

comment on contemporary happenings and even predict future occurrences in his society. Asigbo in “Oral Performance as Siren ... “ affirms that “a folk musician is a special breed who has the gift of prophecy and is therefore looked upon as a voice of vision of his time” (19 - 20). To this end, the folk performer is said to be gifted and witted. What this implies is that he utilizes folklore as an effective raw material for ministering to the needs of his environment. It is therefore paramount that his creative sensibility, impulse and antennae function optimally while he yields to the muse guiding his art. The folklorist is left with the age-old repertoire of his people’s art to cull from. Since these resource materials exist for both sacred and secular purposes, folk performers adapt and creatively manipulate them to reflect the essential messages required for the immediate society. Here lies the inextricability of art, society and performance since art is meant for man rather than man for art. Ameh Akoh emphasizes the inextricability of the trio when he asserts that “there is the ever-existing interdependence between the artist and his society for the art to meaningfully thrive. The songs are invariably products of the happenings in the society upon which the artist retains his role as the conscience of his society” (109). Akoh’s argument is justified by the fact that oral performers sometimes adopt the same folk song, but toe different paths in their performance aesthetics. For instance, Uchendu and Mazeli at separate times in their music careers adapted the *Omalengwo* folk story, a popular folk song of the Igbo people. It is a folksong that tells the story of Omalengwo, a young boy whose mother gave yam (*ji*) and snail (*ejuna*) to roast when he gets hungry before setting out for the market. He was however warned not to roast the snail first as the oil it produces will easily extinguish the fire. But contrary to his mother’s instruction, Omalengwo amidst his uncontrolled appetite, stubbornness and inexperience chose to roast the snail first which caused the fire to get quenched in the process. He got more adventurous by embarking on a fire-search mission to finish up his cooking. His

search turns into a risky adventure as he meets a mystique native doctor (*dibia yaga yaga*) whom he begins to bandy words within esoteric language.

Among the performers that adapted this folk song, Onuorah-Oguno posits that Nelly Uchendu and Ikem Mazeli are outstanding due to their creative approaches in adapting the song and their positions as popular musicians of their times. First performed by Uchendu around the late 80s, the song was given a broader performance design by Mazeli in 2013. Mazeli recreated the same folk song to satisfy the artistic needs of his contemporary society. Since authorship of oral literature is in most cases not traced to anyone in particular, performers give the folklore distinct artistic designs that suit their performance context as a way of infusing artistic identity to the communal resource. Hence, oral performers are driven to take various folkloristic dimensions, which they believe will make their art unique, and ‘fruitful’.

### **The Folk Performer, Social Commitment and Societal Reformation**

Researchers in performance studies have consistently reiterated the reformatory potency of folk performance. Theatre and music performers, according to them, possess rehabilitative capabilities. Nwabuike Okeke argues that the reformatory role of folk performance was properly “captured by the Greek philosopher, Plato, who called it the ‘redirection of the soul’” (40). What qualifies the oral performer as a reformer is his ability to employ his art for therapeutic purposes. African culture and by extension literature possesses, in its natural form, essential values and didactic essence which the folk artist can not afford to sweep under the carpet while making personal creative inputs. This is “because in Africa we recognize that art is in the public domain, a sense of social commitment is mandatory upon the artist. That commitment demands that the (artist) pay attention to his craft ... it also demands that his theme be germane to the concerns of his



community” (Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa and Ihechukwu 258 – 9). Folk performers, by this implication, are a special species of artists committed to utilizing folk resources available in their various societies in creating art that reflects fundamental issues of concern while proffering practicable solutions if and when need be. Simply put, a socially committed folk performer engenders human and societal reformations through his works.

Although modernization is seen as a threat to the sustainability of oral literature, it can however be exploited in popularizing and transporting oral literature using certain agents of globalization. Onuorah-Oguno affirms that:

We live in a changing world. Most of the folk songs were initially done under the moonlight. These days with the advent of television, information communication technology and gadgets, nobody goes for moonlight plays again ... These days people are glued at home to their television, even the television has undergone a lot of metamorphosis ...the cable network has taken over, the world is now a global village. What we now do is that when we recreate these folksongs, we adapt them to new environments and use the globalization agencies to export them. So if you have something like *Tales by Moonlight* or other folklore from Igbo land for instance, you can put them on YouTube and people from all over the world will also enjoy it. (personal interview)

The import of the above statement is that the reformative role of the oral performer has become more sensitive in recent times. Most of Nelly Uchendu’s and Ikem Mazeli’s music is not only played on various television stations today but is equally marketed and distributed via social media sites and apps like YouTube, INSTAGRAM, FACEBOOK, Boomplay, Playstore and so on. This underscores the need for oral performers to be responsible artists committed to utilizing any medium available to them in expounding issues that are pertinent in society while preserving

their culture. Based on the foregoing, Ikem Mazeli believes that committed artistry has been his forte. He explains that his performances are not just for mere entertainment only because he ensures that his works are responsive to the yearnings and aspirations of his society. Labelling his music as “traditional highlife”, the Onitsha-born musician argues that he has used folk songs to satirize some socio-cultural and political issues confronting his community and Igbo land in general. According to him, “My music is philosophical. My music is relevant because if you listen to my music, you will find out that it is a reflection of the things that happen around us. So what I do is to recreate them into music so that people can learn from them and also get entertained” (personal interview).

A classical example of his commitment to societal reformation is the reflection of the kingship saga that took place during the last Ofala Festival of H.R.H Late Igwe Ofala Okagbue. The political faceoff which almost tore the ancient town apart is well captured in his song entitled “Obodo Nulu Onu m” which is translated to mean “let the community listen to my voice”. In the song which is one of the tracks in the album *Ife Ntinye*, Mazeli emphasizes the importance of brotherly love, communal peace and extols heroism. Mazeli who is known to be an ardent user of the Igbo Language (Onitsha dialect mainly), modernized the not-too-popular Onitsha folksong in (re)telling the incident that almost degenerated into a crisis in the Igwe’s palace, the venue of the Ofala in 2005. He praises Ifeanyi Ibegbu, an Onitsha son and former member of the Anambra State of Assembly, whose brave intervention restored peace to the otherwise chaotic ceremony and further calls the warring parties to embrace peace. Mazeli had in an earlier album entitled *Isi Mmili*, performed a song that predicted the impasse which took place a few years later which goes further to buttress the earlier contention that musicians are prophets of some sort. In the track “A na Azo Eze Azo?”, Mazeli highlights man’s insatiable quest for power and fame and the tendency to

stake his life in acquiring them. He uses various idioms and proverbs to call people's attention to man's ephemeral stay on earth while explaining that kingship is a divine position which should not be an object of bloody contest. With the consistent repetition of the proverb, "uwa na aga okili okili", which means nothing in life is constant except change, Mazeli draws people's consciousness to the fact that life is full of twists and so it is necessary to apply caution in dealing with others especially those of apparent lower status. He did not leave out underscoring the expected duty of the King who is the 'father' of the community and so is expected to be a symbol of forgiveness, peace and love. The song "Obodo Nulu Onu m" was targeted at mollifying the aggrieved group who refused to recognize HRH Igwe Nnaemeka Achebe as the Crown and were bent on dethroning him. As the music became more popular with time, peace returned to the town again and the warring parties buried the hatchet and joined hands in community building.

Nelly Uzonma Uchendu equally gained fame in the 70s/80s due to the creative bend she gave to traditional Igbo folksongs. Uchendu whose music may be difficult to specifically label due to the seeming highlife, Christian religious and pop flair her works exude, performed for varied audiences because her music was not restricted to the Igbo-speaking community alone. Hence, Uchendu's artistic responsibility can first be deduced by her painstaking commitment to ensuring that no tribe or strata in Nigerian society is entirely cut off in her music. Uchendu performed in different languages. Although most of her folk adaptations were in her native language, a good number of her performances were either in English, pidgin or code-mixed. For example, in her track "Love Nwantiti", a hit song that earned her the best musician award during the historic FESTAC '77, the late Ogidi-born artist, who passed on over a decade ago, effectively code-mixed 'love' an English word with the Igbo language. "Nigeria Amaka" another popular song of hers is a clarion call on the various regions that make up Nigeria to shun ethnic sentiments

and unite to build a better nation. The detribalized content and performance aesthetics of the song and “Mama Hausa” another track in the album were perhaps what motivated the then Nigeria President, Alhaji Shehu Shagari to confer her with the National Honour, Member of the Order of the Niger (MON). Her track “Waka”, done in Pidgin, was meant to instil some sense of caution and some form of restraint on both ladies and men seeking life partners because physical appearance alone may be misleading. The song urges prospective suitors to be cautious in choosing life partners so as not to fall for persons with low moral standards or prospects. In a similar vein, Mazeli’s “Ife Ntinye”, even though a purely Igbo track, shares didactic similarity with Uchenu’s “Waka”. The song reminds randy ladies, especially the unmarried, of the dangers of premarital sex and the shame associated with it. It further explains that it is a thing of pride for maidens to preserve and protect their womanhood until they are married which is one of the core values of the traditional Igbo Society.

Although Nelly Uchendu’s instrumentation and orchestration are not as sophisticated as that of Ikem Mazeli’s, her penchant for using folklore in developing Igbo language-based performances is identifiable. Her “Udu M Alaputa M” a folksong that talks about a maiden whose water pot got broken along her way to the village stream leaving her at a crossroads is a good example. Faced with such a quagmire, the young girl is thrown into a confused state, not knowing how to face her mother’s wrath on returning home. The story which enunciates the need to treat issues of life with prudence as some mistakes may be irredeemable is given rhythmic panache through Uchendu’s voice modulation, stress and instrumentation.

One of the cardinal duties of the artist is to dedicate his art to the development of society. The oral performer does not perform in a vacuum. To sustain his art, therefore, the performer seeks the support and endorsement of the audience through praise-singing. Onuorah-Oguno holds that even though Nelly Uchendu and Ikem

Mazeli were artistically relevant to different generations, they are regarded as praise singers. Nelly was inclined to sing the praise of the government of the day, especially while performing in social functions, according to Onuorah-Oguno, that earned her rapid promotion as a government staff in the then Arts Council during the Jim Nwobodo administration of the Old Anambra State (personal interview). But despite the similarity in the performance aesthetics of both artists, Uchendu cannot be referred to as a “siren” because her praise pattern is not as superfluous as Mazeli’s. Oguno explains that periodic influence may have contributed to shaping Mazeli’s performance approach as the present-day bourgeoisie seem to enjoy vigorous praise-singing. According to him:

Ikem has taken praise-singing to another level because Ikem lives in an era where some money bags are en vogue. I don’t think Nelly got sprayed money as much as Ikem has done presently ... you can’t talk of any event that has to do with the high strata in the society around Igbo land starting from Onitsha, his place of birth, that does not invite Ikem for performance. (personal interview)

Praise singing is a part of the oral performance tradition. In the olden days, heroic deeds of warriors, kings, women leaders and even commoners are craftily infused into folklore, songs, and legends to teach society lessons about bravery, hard work, resilience, patriotism and so on. The oral performer should however not allow the inherent reformatory potentials of oral art to be lost to praise-singing. Again, to give their performances that traditional African flavour, the folkloristic should not depart from the African story-telling technique as this may result in distorting the contextual composition and principle of the folklore. In light of the foregoing, Sam Ukala’s *Folkism* theory will be useful in appraising the performers’ ability to retain the African storytelling tradition in their folk performances.

## **Folkism, Didacticism and Praise-Singing in Uchendu and Mazeli's Oral Performances**

One of the branches of the traditional African theatre that has developed over the years and is still developing because of its contributions to the growth of theatre practice is the story-telling theatre. An offshoot of traditional theatre, the storytelling theatre which is essentially an oral dramatic form became a necessary medium for sustaining the African culture by transmitting important historical tales, folk, legends, rituals and myths from one generation to the other. In search of an alternative theatre form distinct from the Western stereotype, African scholars began to experiment with story-telling theatre. One of the outcomes of such experimentations is "Folkism", Sam Ukala's "pet drama theory"; an improvement on the deficiencies found in the theoretical conceptualizations of dramatists like J.P Clark and Efua Sutherland (Akpuda 32). Thus Sam Ukala, a renowned Nigerian theatre scholar, playwright and practitioner evolved this theory that gained ascendancy in African theatre practice due to its "innovative style of dramaturgy and stagecraft... (that) ... utilizes the structure of oral traditional performance which consists of music, dance, story-telling and mime" (Enita 48-9).

Even though the availability and accessibility of the folk-loaded culture of Mbiri community of the Ika people in Delta state directly inspired Ukala's Folkism theory, its style and approach are similar to the Igbo folkloristic concept. This is perhaps the reason Igbo oral performers seem to deliberately or unknowingly adhere to the principles of Folkism in their performance aesthetics. Emma Ebo and Canice Nwosu posit that "the story-telling theatre technique and the use of the narrator are some of the methodologies of folkism. Through these methodologies, the people's folkloric theatre repertoire is tapped and brought to the contemporary audience" (151). In a typical traditional context, the success of a performance or story-telling session lies in the ability of the performer to sustain audience interest from the beginning of a show

to the end. He can achieve this by artistically weaving the messages in his performances with surplus entertainment threads. The folk performer is a skilled storyteller; a distinguished raconteur who is armed with rare performative qualities. Some of those intrinsic qualities help him to captivate his audience during performance. Hence, Okpewho affirms that “the storyteller (oral performer) needs to possess narrative qualities. He needs to have a rich, resonating voice” (130). The oral artist exerts a considerable direct impact on his audience during performances. This socio-psychological influence of the folk narrator/singer is based on his versed knowledge of both the history and folk tradition of his people as well as the first-hand experience(s) he obtains from everyday happenings in his society. Through the process of syncretism, the above-mentioned qualities and attributes all harmonize in producing an aesthetic performance.

In light of the above contention, Ukala prescribes eight “Laws of Aesthetic Response” that should direct performers and their performances. The laws are meant to create as well as maintain performer-audience relationship which is an essential component of African folktale and story-telling traditions. The Laws of Aesthetic Response as propounded by Ukala include:

- The Law of Opening
- The Law of Joint Performance
- The Law of Creativity, Free Enactment and Responsibility
- The Law of the Urge to Judge
- The Law of Protest Against Suspense
- The Law of Expression of Emotions
- The Law of Ego Projection and
- The Law of Closing (qtd. in Ebo and Nwosu 154).

Oral performers in the process of modification and recreation of folklore are guided by most of the above laws.

Using Folkism, concerning some of the Laws of Aesthetic Response, as a theoretical base for the analysis of the *Omalengwo* folksong as adapted by the two performers being studied here produces some significant findings. In Nelly Uchendu's version, the song is preceded by other songs and is performed with a fast tempo and high pitch. The keyboard; a lead instrument in Uchendu's musical ensemble, introduces the song while the singer starts the oral performance of the story without much attempt at evoking audience interest or imagination. The opening of Uchendu folksong lacks robust artistic embellishment, especially in the use of lyrics. Ikem Mazeli perhaps capitalized on this flaw to create his version of the song. Mazeli's version of *Omalengwo* has divergent performance aesthetics and contains what can be regarded as a conscious attempt at inducing excitement in the audience while preparing their mind towards the story-telling session. In this regard, Mazeli starts his story-telling by making introductory comments with proverbs and idioms. He praises his artistry and extols himself as an excellent raconteur before inviting his mother, brothers, clan's men and whoever cares to 'gather' and participate in the suspense-filled story he is about to narrate. Mazeli's provocative opening here is supported by Ukala's first law; The Law of Opening which suggests that "the opening of an African folktale performance is expected to arouse the audience and to introduce the subject matter and (perhaps) the characters of the story" (Enita 51).

Unlike literary drama where the audience is not familiar with the scripted lines of a playwright, Ukala posits that The Law of Joint Performance is more effective in oral performance because of the "typical audience pre-knowledge of most of the stories as well as its interlocutory (or responsorial) skill" (qtd. in Enita 52). The two performers being studied apply this second Law of Aesthetic Response. Regarding them as "live performers",



Onuorah-Oguno explains that their abilities to “compose on the spur-of-the-moment” is a major reason people are attracted to their performance style. Most of Uchendu’s performances are simple folksongs the audience is often familiar with or can learn impromptu. She is said to have often co-performed with audience members she met on stage at any point in time who often joined the concert on stage by dancing, clapping and singing responsorial part of the songs (personal interview). This style of joint performance is also an attribute of Mazeli’s live performances. His shows are frequently greeted with audience excitement marked by dramatic contributions akin to those ‘acted’ during Uchendu’s. The audience in African performance settings is seen as “spec actors” because they are co-performers rather than mere observers.

The Law of Creativity, Free Enactment and Responsibility is a tripod-based principle that talks about the approach a performer takes in making his performance suit the environment and mood of a particular event at each given time. Since both musicians are live performers, they are always faced with the task of weaving issues of the moment into their performances. A closer observation of Mazeli’s live performances, for instance, reveals that in almost all the songs he performs during celebrative occasions, he equally sings when invited to a mourning event. What changes is the lyrics, and perhaps the mood which can be detected in his voice. This law therefore “leaves room for a high level of improvisation that gives the performer the privilege to adopt new experiences – in line with the theme” (Enita 54). It is worth noting that while the performer is free to create and enact new ideas while performing, he should as a matter of principle do this with a sense of responsibility. Mazeli utilizes the Law of Creativity, Free Enactment and Responsibility in his “Omalengwo” song. In the song, one notices a subtle digression during the narration. His swift switch to singing praises of some notable sons, after steering the interest of the audience with a catchy opening, is probably his artistic way of triggering suspense while selling his art. Onuorah-Oguno reveals

that there is always a didactic lesson in any folk or praise performance in an ideal African setting. He explains that there is a message embedded in every folksong so “within praise-singing which is not alien to African culture, there is also didacticism ... but didacticism supersedes praise-singing. Didacticism comes first, entertainment comes second and praise-singing comes last, if I want to add that middle appendage, because folksongs are originally meant to correct the ills of the society while entertaining” (personal interview). The didactic implication of praise-singing is exemplified in Uchendu’s “Obi gi Amaka” (Your Heart is Beautiful). In this song, Nelly in singing the praises of certain people holds that true beauty is the beauty of the heart as appearance can be deceptive. She therefore advises that people seek the acquisition of such intrinsic ‘wealth’ more than mere materialism for the betterment of society.

The next law that is closely related to the issues above is The Law of The Expression of the Emotions. This sixth law is described as the audience's reaction to an ongoing performance. The audience reserves the right to either approve or disapprove of a performance which can be shown through actions like dancing, responsorial and even spraying of money on the performer. The law also gives credence to praise singing as a crucial dimension of African performance aesthetics. Performers tend to seek the endorsement of the “spec-actors” who are part of the performance by singing their praise. Praise singing has been identified as an important aspect of African culture. Asigbo in his “Oral Performance as Siren ...” affirms that praise-singing is significant in the folk life of Africans hence heroes and the wealthy are motivated to greater exploits when praised (27 - 8). In essence, it is an artistic ploy through which oral performers reduce the emotions of the audience. Although Uchendu is said to draw out audience emotions during live performances through praise singing, she tends to elicit audience emotions mainly through her sonorous voice in the studio-recorded versions of her performances.

The Law of Closing which is the eighth and last law in Ukala's laws of aesthetics response is another principle that is crucial in analyzing the practice of oral performance. In short, it can be regarded as the most important of the laws judging by the popular maxim that the end justifies the means. This law draws attention to the fact that the closing of a performance is as important as its opening. Hence, it accentuates the need to apply a unique closing approach that highlights the message in the story. The performer's closing statements should reinforce the storyline while pointing at the morals being projected (Enita 56). Mazeli applies this principle in folksongs like the *Omalengwo* story as he closes the narration with the chorus. The didactic essence of the folk song is however not well accentuated as prescribed in this last law. Uchendu who also did not make elaborate creative input in the folksong equally closes the narration hastily. The performers' approaches in closing the folksong do not conform fully to the demands of the last law of aesthetic response hence only a critical audience may manage to grasp some lessons at the end. Emphasis on the moral of the story at the closing of the story is what the law demands. Legendary folklorist Mike Ejeagha's closing approach in most of his folk performances is exemplary here.

## **Conclusion**

Folklore is a product of the oral tradition of a people that is meant to maintain and sustain societal regeneration. Amongst other means of transferring these salient elements of the African culture from one generation to the other, oral performance has remained a principal medium. Oral performance is a calling. The oral performer is therefore saddled with the responsibility of discharging this duty faithfully. Since it is the craftsmanship of the artist that helps to explore the full potential of a work of art, the oral performer exhibits resourcefulness by exerting a positive influence on society. The folk performer is meant to be a sensitive

artist who is committed to adapting folklore of his people in making relevant contributions to issues that characterize the society.

It has been deduced from this study that didacticism and praise-singing enjoy a bilateral harmonious relationship in a folk performance. The duo intermingle because whereas didacticism is socio-politically therapeutic, praise-singing is socio-economically motivating to both the artist and the audience. Let us however hasten to reiterate the fact that excessive praise-singing may be counterproductive. It can either drown the didactic voice in such a performance or distract the audience from grabbing the message inherent in it. Uchendu and Mazeli have been identified as two folklorists who have contributed significantly to preserving and promoting indigenous folk tradition, language and aesthetics through their performances.

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