

ON ABOMINATION, NEMESIS AND OMINOUS IN IGBO: A SQUIB

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Abstract

Okafor (2014) explores the concepts of abomination, nemesis and ominous the Igbo culture. This squib argues that these concepts, as characterised by the author, are confusing, hence the need for clarification.

Keywords: Confusion, abomination, nemesis and ominous

Introduction

Background to the study

An aspect of the Igbo world view is the people's belief about the origin of the universe. It also includes the nature and the regulations, prescriptions and prohibitions as to what is proper in the universe. In the Igbo culture, some acts are abhorrent to the supernatural forces, hence abominable, and there are nemeses consequent upon anyone's perpetration of an abominable act. Related to this, there are also ominous signs that communicate impending calamities to whoever violates the abominations. These concepts are clearly defined in the Igbo culture, though, with minor variation in what constitute each across the subcultures, but not on their conceptualizations. It has been observed, however, that these three concepts – abomination, nemesis and ominous are confused in some of the available literature, particularly, Okafor (2014). This paper sets out to clear the confusions attendant to the work in the interest of those who may consult the work as an extant document for future references.

Brief overview of *abomination, nemesis and ominous*

We give below brief overview of the concepts of *abomination, nemesis* and *ominous*.

Abomination

Abomination refers to any act by an individual or group that is forbidden by the community because such an act is inimical to the relationship between the community and supernatural forces. Such acts include, but not limited to murder, incest (having sexual intercourse with one's mother, sister or daughter), and stealing of yams (particularly newly planted ones). In the past, the punishment for an

abominable act by an individual ranged from selling into slavery, banishment to ostracism; but in the present, the sanction is basically the performance of some propitiatory sacrifices for cleansing.

Nemesis

Nemesis (as pertains to the Igbo culture) refers to an event executed by the deities and ancestors against an individual or community as punishment for disturbing the cosmic relationship between them and humans. An individual or group may perform an abominable act secretly of which no propitiatory sacrifice was performed to appease the deities and ancestors. It could also be that the community was aware of the abominable act but played down on the needed propitiatory sacrifice. This is an intolerable offence against the supernatural forces for which the individual or community must be punished. The punishment includes: premature death, suicide, famine, etc. As a solution to this, the community engages the services of a diviner to know who/what was responsible for the unusual events and the appropriate sacrifices to be performed.

Ominous

This refers to signs and events that are suggestive of impending or non- calamitous and calamitous incidents. Ominous signs and events convey information to individuals or communities on both inauspicious and auspicious incidents. However, most ominous messages are inauspicious and could be of death or ordinary misfortunes. Ominous messages or information are transmitted to individuals or community through some animate and inanimate entities. For example, animate: animals/birds (owl, python, dog), plants (Iroko, kolanut); inanimate: thunder, rainbow, obstacles. Ominous messages also get to individuals through dreams. The message of the ominous signs and events are revealed by the oracle through divination. Ominous signs and events include the following: the hooting of an owl on top of someone's roof, a cock crowing early in the night, dashing one's foot against an obstacle and so on.

Previous Literature

We examine here, some of the views of scholars on the three concepts of *abomination*, *nemesis* and *ominous*.

Abomination

In his discussions of the traditional Igbo religious beliefs, practices and organization, Ilogu (1974) points out that "Many social offences become aru or pollution or abomination because they infringe the laws of the earth goddess, who, because of her importance in ensuring health, agricultural fortune, and hunting successes, is well

known all over Igbo land” (p.35). In terms of traditional morality, Ilogu further observes that abominations can have moral guilt attached to them in addition to being things prohibited by Igbo moral code. He further states that abomination, in the Igbo moral code, is the destruction of the harmony and peace equilibrium between man, nature and the spirit world. For him (Ilogu 1974), there are major and minor abominations. The major ones can be expressed with a preceding statement “thou shall not”, for example, stealing of yams from the barn or from the farm, homicide, incest. The minor ones cannot be preceded with “thou shall not”, for example, a woman giving birth to twins, a growing child cutting the upper tooth first. The woman giving birth to twins cannot, by moral decisions and proper motivations, control the formation of the twins in her womb.

In his discussions of the Igbo traditional moral philosophy, Nwala (1985) mentions abominations as the negative moral values. He states:

These stress those actions and behaviours whose performance militates against the realization of the ideal life. The stress proper relations among beings in nature and as a result help to maintain the cosmological order. They are mostly definitive prohibitions, and include patricide, incest, killing of sacred animals, murder, women climbing trees...Violation of these are aru (abominations) and they also require some atonement in the nature of sacrifices-propitiatory and cleansing offerings-banishment, slavery, ostracism, open apology etc.(p.148).

Commenting on abomination and its cleansing in Adazi Nnukwu Igbo, Ogbukagu (1997) points out that:

An abomination (*Alu*, *Nso*) is an act of misdeed that is vehemently abhorred and deprecated by the Igbo community and therefore totally reprehensible to all. It is defilement and desecration of the normal order or living and approach to things and a heinous offence that provokes calamity, doom and ostracism within a society. There are two types of *Alu*, namely *Aluluana* and *Alulugbada*. The *Alulugbada* is more serious than *Aluluana*. Some of the offences classified as *Alu* in Adazi Nnukwu are: having sex with a very close consanguineous relative and a brother's or father's wife, a brother marrying his sister, a woman to climb a kolanut tree, pluck or pick it; a woman to climb a palm tree and/or cut a palm nuts head; a married woman absent at the moment of the death of her husband, and suicide especially by hanging.

Orji (1999) discusses abominations (*aru*) in Igboland, as an aspect of the religions of the Igbo. He posits that there were many things which the Igbo termed ‘aru’(abomination) whenever such things happened, or when they were committed

by any person. Somebody could commit an abomination intentionally or unintentionally. Abomination in those days, was an abomination, whether it was premeditated, done in ignorance or by accident. He concludes that abominations were those conducts which the Igbo people felt were contrary and objectionable to the order of nature. For him, some of the major abominations in Igbo land include: murder, twins, growing the upper teeth first, sexual intercourse with a widow, dying face-downwards, eating of sacred or totem animal, having sexual intercourse with one's mother, sister or daughter(incest), having sexual intercourse with an animal, dying on top of a tree, suicide etc.

Orji (1999) further points out that any act of abomination in Igbo land was regarded as a mortal sin against the gods, the earth, the heavens, the living and the dead. In effect, the person has defiled himself or herself by such an act. To be clean again, such a person had to undergo a sort of cleansing or purification. The purification exercise was a sort of propitiatory sacrifice to appease the earth, the heavens, the living and the dead. The items for the sacrifice are usually rare to find and this is believed to serve as a deterrent to future offenders.

Nemesis

Nwala (1985) makes reference to nemesis (retribution) in his discussion of metaphysical evil in the Igbo traditional philosophy. He observes that certain evils are attributed to human beings by inference. This inference is made because of the belief in retributive judgement. For example: deformities, death through drowning, premature deaths, famine. When any of these happens the traditional people regard it as *nsoala*. It means that those affected must have somehow disturbed the cosmic balance through their actions. As a result they are being punished by the deities and ancestors through any of the above events. Usually it is due to an error of omission or commission.

In the discussing instances of nemesis in Chinedum Ofomata's novels, Offor (2010), cites Audi's (1999) statement on the theory of nemesis. Retribution (Nemesis) is the theory that punishment is justified by the moral desert of the offender; on this view, a person who culpably does a wrongful action deserves punishment, and this desert is a sufficient as well as a necessary condition of just punishment.

Onukawa (2015) examines the events of nemesis in some Igbo literary works. She points out that in different cultures of the world and with current trends in international cultural awareness, people have ways of discerning between what is good, bad or evil in their cultures. The evil tendencies are viewed with all seriousness whenever they occur. They affect the lives of the people by attracting

some nemesis. In the Igbo traditional culture, nemesis abounds in consonance with the people's thought and belief about life. The Igbo regularly assert that *O bu isi kotere ebu ka ebuna-agba* (The head that disturbs the wasp gets stung by the wasp). This strengthens their strong belief that whatever one sows is what one reaps-the law of retributive justice.

Ominous.

Nwala (1985) discusses the ominous events as part of his standard explanations of the nature of Igbo traditional thought. He asserts thus:

In Igbo traditional thought there are some ready-made explanations and meanings of certain phenomena which many average Igbo man recognizes (although there some local variations). They border on what one would dismiss as superstition. In Mbaise, for example, these are some examples: a) Dashing the foot against a stump or stone or any other obstacle has a special omen (good or bad) depending on which foot and whether one's immediate junior is a boy or girl. b) seeing a giant millipede in one's home is a bad sign. Just like hearing the voice of an owl near the house in the day. If any of these happens to an Igbo man in this area, he will surely se a diviner because owls, giant millipedes and pythons are agents of the spirits and deities, and could also be the spirits of witches.(p.107).

Nwadike (1999) studies the ominous as used in contemporary Igbo literature. He studies the ominous signs and events from a literary perspective. He states that:

The ominous gives a suggestion or warning about something bad that is going to happen. In various cultures of the world, irrespective of the people's acceptance of Christianity or any other form of received religion, or their high quality of civilization, such a people have their local premonitions and omens, or what the church calls 'superstitions'. This is so because life is full of mysteries, and is beset with a very heavy fog which does not yield to small light. Literature is a response to what happens in the society, and authors have brought in these signs and portents in their works to make for realism and reality. As one reads some of the literatures of the world, one comes across these ominous and portentous events which are presented in the forms of the unusual behaviours of the natural phenomena such as the unusual behaviours of the natural phenomena such as the elements and animals. The ominous also are in the forms of dreams, peculiar signs, nightmares, telepathies, forewarnings, instinct information, man coming in contact with uncommon objects and happenings, and a myriad of other forces that are associated with local beliefs (p.159).

Adibe (2008) discusses ominous as mystical interference in the Igbo life style. He believes that “life is to be lived in normalcy and not otherwise. When any strange thing comes into that normal lifestyle, it is termed an intruder. Some of the intruders usually come with the ominous signs” (p.220). He observes that the Igbo believe in omen and in the Igbo traditional religion, omen connotes good or bad. To him, “omen is a phenomenon or incident regarded as a prophetic sign” (p.220). Adibe further asserts that:

Omen is a natural phenomenon with a religious significance. In Igbo traditional religion, omen connotes some good or bad. From experiences, the good need not generate further inquiry, while the bad omen must be investigated through consultation of the diviners. Omen could go for one *mmuo*-voice of the spirits or *okwummuo*-words of the spirits. Omen *asakalana-egosihe di omimi* (symbol of the mysterious) disturbs Igbo people greatly when it is perceived (p.221).

On Confusion of Abomination, Nemesis and Ominous in Okafor (2014).

In her discussions of the ominous as one of the concepts involved in her study, Okafor (2014) misjudges as ominous, the events cited in Ilogu (1974), Achebe (1958), Okoro and Epuchie (1995), Anyacho (2005), and Okeke (2007). We talk of misjudgement because the analysts do not posit that the events are ominous.

In her review of the concept of ominous in some popular works, Okafor (2014) contends that the following are ominous signs and events: famine, flood and tornado (Anyacho, 2005) birth of a child with set of teeth in the mouth (Ilogu 1974, Okeke, 2007); prolonged illness (Achebe 1958, Ilogu 1974), shedding the blood of a kinsman (Achebe 1958). Again in her data analysis on the *ominous* in *O Ji Ihe Nwata*, Okafor (2014) asserts that drought, famine and hardship are instances of *ominous* (Okoro and Epuchie, 1995). We present below some of the excerpts from Okafor (2014)

Misjudgements of some events as ominous-Excerpts from Okafor(2014).

Drought, Famine, Flood and Tornado in Anyacho (2005)

With reference to Anyacho (2005) on the occurrence of drought, famine, flood, tornado, Okafor (2014) asserts:

In the traditional African society, frequent occurrences of certain things can be very ominous ...frequent occurrence of drought, famine, flood, tornado etc. are signs of impending danger to some communities, the fear generated by these signs make those concerned to consult an oracle. The consultation of the oracle will tell them the action to take in order to ward off the impending danger (p.18).

A Child Born with A Set of teeth in his Mouth in Ilogu (1974), and Okeke (2007)

With reference to Ilogu (1974) and Okeke (2007), on “a child born with a set of teeth in his mouth”, Okafor (2014) states:

In accordance with Ilogu’s idea, Okeke (2007), presents the two ominous signs presented by Ilogu in his novel titled *O di Egwu*. In this novel, Okeke presents a child called Isikotebu who was born with set of teeth in his mouth and was considered an evil child. The Ezemmuo asks the parents of the child to kill him but they refused. Later the child grew up to be an evil child. He was used for sacrifice to cleanse the land he polluted with his abominable acts,(p.19).

Prolonged illness in Achebe (1958) and Ilogu (1974)

On ‘prolonged illness’, Okafor (2014) asserts:

Prolonged illness is another example of bad omen stated by Ilogu..Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* is also of the opinion that prolonged or frequent illness is ominous. Here Ezimma the daughter of Ekwefi and Okonkwo is said to be falling sick from Iba (malaria). The Iba gives the parents a lot of anxiety because Ezimma is OgbanjeOgbanje is an evil spirit that would deliberately plague a family with misfortune. Its literal translation in the Igbo language is ‘children who come and go’.(p.19).

Shedding of blood of kinsman in Achebe (1958)

On the shedding of blood of kinsman in Achebe (1958), Okafor (2014) says:

It is a bad omen for somebody in Igboland to shed the blood of his clansman either by accident or intent. Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* acknowledges this statement by showcasing how Okonkwo’s gun explodes at Ezeudu’s funeral and a piece of iron from it kills Ezeudu’s sixteen year old son. This is a tragedy and also ominous (p.20).

Drought, Famine and Hardship in Okoro and Epuchie (1995)

In her discussions of ominous incidence in *O jiihenwata*, by Okoro and Epuchie, Okafor(2014), says that “the writers use natural phenomena such as drought, famine and hardship to expose the ominous in the play. It is a common belief by Africans and Igbo in particular, that, the gods provide the sanctions for moral misbehaviour and big misfortune on offender,if he does not atone for his offence”(p.130).

The Facts of the Events Misjudged As Ominous in Okafor (2014).

Our position is that the above events designated as ominous by Okafor (2014) are not actually what they stand for in the Igbo culture. The views of scholars on the

concepts of abomination, nemesis, and ominous attest to our position above. We, therefore, give below what we believe are there actual designations.

Drought, Famine, Flood, and Tornado

Drought, famine, flood, and tornado are issues of nemesis- punishment for abominable acts committed by an individual or the society, and not ominous – signs of an impending danger. As a matter of fact, these cannot be warnings of impending punishment because the other punishment that would be greater than these is death itself and these punishments can result in death. It is also necessary to point out that in the case of Ezimma, frequent or prolonged illness characterizes an *ogbanje*, and does not inform of the possible arrival of *ogbanje*

The Birth of a Child with Teeth in the Mouth

The incidences “birth of a child with teeth in the mouth” are considered abomination, indicating very serious offences committed by an individual or group against the cultural norms of the society. They are not ominous.

Shedding of blood of a kinsman

This is also a perfect example of *abomination* in the Igbo culture. Virtually all of the analysts on this and related issues in the Igbo culture have this as an example of *abomination* in the culture. It is not an *ominous* event.

Drought, Famine and Hardship

Again, these are clear instances of nemesis befalling a community for abominable acts. They are not instances of ominous-they are not warnings of impending dangers, they are dangers themselves.

It is important and necessary that we point out the following:

- i. Ominous as a sign is not harmful in itself, but rather it is a warning against an impending harm, whereas nemesis is the disaster or punishment that befalls an individual or group for an abominable act committed. Nemesis may be preceded by ominous signs and events
- ii. Ominous signs and events are avertable by placating the gods, whereas nemesis is not avertable. In some cases, nemesis comes because the preceding ominous is ignored.
- iii. Abomination may be followed by ominous and then nemesis
- iv. Abomination may not be followed by ominous and nemesis if the actor is sincere and the necessary propitiatory sacrifices are performed to placate the supernatural powers

Summary of the Findings and Conclusion

This squib sets out to principally examine the confusion of some instances of abomination, nemesis and ominous in Okafor (2014). These three concepts are part and parcel of the Igbo traditional world view with clear cut distinctions.

The events of child born with teeth in the mouth, shedding of blood of kinsman, and similar issues are *abominations*, that is, violations of the cosmic order- heinous offences that provoke calamity. The events of drought, famine, flood, and hardship are *nemesis*, that is, punishment for the said defilement and desecration of the normal cosmic order. These events are not ominous, that is they are not signs of impending calamitous or non-calamitous events. A better understanding of the three different concepts became necessary to avoid some misconceptions imbued by Okafor 2014.

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