

Performance and Plot in *The Ozidi Saga*

Isidore Okpewho

*The Ozidi Saga*¹ tells the story of a culture hero (Ozidi) of the Ijo of the Niger Delta in southern Nigeria. In the traditional context in which the career of the hero was recalled—an annual festival of seven days' duration, involving a variety of symbolic rituals as well as singing and dancing—the re-enactment took the form primarily of dramatization of key moments or episodes in the myth; the full story was never told in a coherent sequence from a canonical beginning to a canonical end. In this way there was ample room for the ritual officiant, dressed in white apparel and holding objects traditionally identified with the hero, to engage in song and dance sequences involving the participation of his acolytes and members of the attending crowd. The celebrated Nigerian poet-playwright John Pepper Clark[-Bekederemo], who first drew our attention to this exciting tradition (1963) and later published a text of the full story he had collected (1977/1991), has also recorded a 16mm film of a festival honoring the Ozidi tradition in Tarakiri Orua, recognized as its home of origin.²

In the film, the emphasis of the performance is on a sequence of *dromena* charting the representative moments in Ozidi's career. The story published by Clark-Bekederemo, however, comes from a command

¹ The full title reads as follows: *The Ozidi Saga: Collected and Translated from the Oral Ijo Version of Okabou Ojobolo*. The book was originally published in 1977 at Ibadan, Nigeria in a joint imprint by Oxford University Press and Ibadan University Press. J. P. Clark, as he was then known, was the collector, translator, and editor. In 1991 Howard University Press, Washington, DC republished the book, with the editor's last name as Clark-Bekederemo and "With a Critical Introduction by Isidore Okpewho." Page references in this essay are to this latter edition.

² *Tides of the Delta*, directed by Frank Speed under the auspices of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, is available as a 16mm film at the James Coleman African Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, among other places.

performance hosted by an Ijo matron, Madam Yabuku Inekorogha, in the university city of Ibadan, about three hundred miles away from Tarakiri Orua. Deferring to the tradition, the narrator Okabou Ojobolo, aided by an orchestra of musicians and cheer-leaders, told the story in a total of seven days and before an audience made up partly of Ijo residents in Ibadan but largely of non-Ijo Nigerians and a few of Clark-Bekederemo's expatriate colleagues from Ibadan University. Although some key rituals of the traditional festival program were incorporated in Okabou's performance, the emphasis here was clearly on the *legomena* (as well as histrionic acts used to graphic effect), giving as full an account of the myth as the narrator could muster. Never having done such a thing before, Okabou was clearly under an unaccustomed stress to register a credible performance, a task made particularly challenging by the Ijo audience who, moved by patriotic pride to empathize with a cherished tradition of their native land, nonetheless spared no pains in forcing Okabou to live up to his charge as guardian of the tradition.

This paper seeks to examine the fate of the narrative precisely under these conditions. Since the Ijo audience obviously knew the tale or at least the basic outlines of it, I am interested in discovering how the somewhat beleaguered narrator was able to hold his own in that daunting atmosphere and still succeed in conjuring, as John Foley would say, the "inherently meaningful" codes of an immanent tradition (1991:8), thus achieving an account of truly classic proportions. Put differently, how was the bard able to hold the plot of the tale together, despite the potentially destabilizing influence of contingent factors?

The Pattern of Confrontations

The Ozidi Saga essentially narrates the successive fights, fourteen in all, between the hero Ozidi and some powerful figures that constitute a menace to life and leadership in his society. To understand the format of these fights, I will first summarize the story.

The kingship of the city-state of Orua falls on the last of its seven wards. The title devolves on a family whose eldest member is a retarded man, Temugedege. Embarrassed at the thought of an idiot becoming king of Orua, some of its most powerful generals plot a coup d'état. Temugedege's younger brother, Ozidi, the supreme commander of Orua's forces, leads a party to a neighboring community to procure a human head for the coronation rites. Along the way, Ozidi is ambushed by his men, led by Ofé the Short, and bludgeoned to death with a club. His head, severed from his

body, is brought home by Ofe and dumped at Temugedege's feet in mockery of the latter's ambitions.

Ozidi's wife, Orea, is totally distraught at the sight of her husband's severed head; but her mother Oreame, a woman of unequaled mystical powers, quietly buries her son-in-law and flies to her hometown with Orea. Before his death, Ozidi has impregnated his wife, who a few months afterward bears a son, later called Ozidi after his father. Oreame loses no time in mystically fortifying the boy for his career of revenge: first instilling in him a spirit for facing all imaginable dangers, then summoning the wizard Bouakarakarabiri to brew a potion for Ozidi from a grim medley of flora and fauna.

Oreame slaps the mixture down Ozidi's bowels, from where it will be summoned for every fight. Having mystically prepared the boy for a life that will be fraught with preternatural dangers, Oreame flies off again with Ozidi and his mother Orea, back to Orua. Taking residence in his paternal homestead, he is introduced to his idiot uncle Temugedege with due traditional protocol. Then Oreame equips Ozidi with his final resources: she summons from the earth first a duet of musicians as "bodyguards," then a blacksmith who molds Ozidi an extraordinary, seven-pronged sword needed for clinching every victory. This, too, Oreame slaps down Ozidi's bowels.

Fully set for action, Ozidi does not take long to attract the powerful figures who now rule supreme in the land. The clash with his father's assassins was, in fact, presaged by an incident that occurred while the blacksmith was molding Ozidi's sword. As the boy wielded the blade just to test its strength, it broke into pieces that hurtled off furiously and killed a son of each of the principal assassins, Ofe and Azezabife. The final provocation came when Ozidi, lying in feigned sleep across a market road in order to pick up random gossip about how his father died, heard the wives of these assassins bragging about their men's killing of the late Ozidi. Rising from the ground, the boy sliced the two women into neat pieces that skittered off, dripping with blood, to report to their horrified husbands that their old enemy's son was in town!

So the assassins prepare to fight, though it is clear from their exertions that they have no illusions about the terrors ahead. One by one they all fall to the hero, each in a struggle in which all resources, natural and supernatural, are called into play. For each of these men has something extraordinary about and in him that tests the resources with which Ozidi has been equipped. In the end, however, he proves more than a match for all opponents—first the assassins, then an array of monstrous figures who find their reputation as supreme terror threatened by the upstart stranger.

The schema on the next page presents the sequence followed by Okabou in narrating Ozidi's story. No single encounter contains all the stages represented in the outline. But the persistence with which the narrator follows the basic progression of moves shows that his mind has intuited a loose formula³ that enables him to maneuver the details of his fabulation through the challenging interests of his audience(s), the pressures of the seven-day format enjoined by tradition, and the limitations of his all too human memory.

The first stage in any fight episode is the introduction of the enemy. There are variations in the entry of the opponent into the conflict. Some characters come in bragging who they are, with a stridency aimed at terrifying Ozidi and Oreame. This style of entry is adopted by a few of the assassins, chiefly Azezabife, Agbogidi, and Ogueren: the sudden reappearance of their old victim in the person of his son come to exact justice evidently throws them into a nervous self-assertion. Of the three, Azezabife reveals the strongest tremor of fear, no doubt because he has felt the earliest intimations of the impending doom in the death of his wife and son from the boy hero's sword. Another mode of introduction is by way of a dramatic presentation of the opponent's physical appearance. This mode of entry evokes as much tension as the bragging; in describing the character, the narrator tries to impress us with the scale of danger facing the hero and his grandmother. In this category we find the lieutenants of the head assassin Ofe: Badoba, Ebeya, and Fingrifin (also called Sigrisi). The description here can be particularly affecting. Badoba, who appears shortly after Ozidi has disposed of Ogueren, a giant with 20 hands and 20 feet, is portrayed as a figure of such stupendous proportions that one spectator seeks comparison of Badoba and Ogueren, forcing the narrator to make a face-saving explanation (1977/1991:147). Ebeya is "a sturdy and great champion. When Ebeya appeared on the field, when he stepped out in all his paraphernalia, it took the breath away" (162). To demonstrate Ebeya's dead seriousness as a warrior, Okabou pits him right away in combat with Ozidi, even before the hero and his mentor Oreame know anything about him (163). As for Fingrifin the Net Man, we hear of "his body all iron and nothing but iron, hard with shell and plate so he was, a man impossible to dent" (182). Not only is he hard to crack, he is also magically endowed:

³ Although I am dealing here with the pattern of progressive moves in the development of the Ozidi story, this paper will not discuss the evidence of "formulas" and "themes" in the Parry-Lord tradition. I have treated such *internal* structural qualities of the Ozidi and other African epics elsewhere (Okpewho 1979a:154-201); here, I am concerned more with *external* factors than I was in that earlier study.

Ozidi's Confrontations

<i>Ozidi's foe introduced</i>	<i>Ozidi/Oreame provoke fight</i>	<i>Foe challenges Ozidi</i>	<i>Danger signs for Oreame</i>	<i>Danger signs for foe</i>	<i>Actual fighting</i>	<i>Ozidi in trouble</i>	<i>Ozidi re-covers</i>	<i>Ozidi kills foe</i>	<i>Harrying of Temuge dege</i>	<i>Ozidi cools off</i>
Agbogidi (65)		67		66-65	68-69			69	72-73	73
Azezabife (70)		70-71		74, 87	79-96	79, 91, 94	82-93, 95	96-97	[92]	100
Ogueren (100)		100		102-103, 116-117	105-126	105, 121	125	126	127-128	128
Akpobrisi (131)		135			137-140	137-138	138	140		142
Badoba (147)		148			151-152			152	158-159	159
Ebeya (162)		163		167-168	163-169	163-164	168	168-169		169
Fingrifin (182)	182-183			185	187-189	184	187	189		190
Ofe (169, 190)	173-190			174, 190, 193	175-176, 194-201			201		207
Scrotum King (210)		210	220	212-213	218-229	219	222	229		230
Tebesonoma (236)		237, 240	241-243		246-267	244-245	246	267		[274]
Odogu (232, 275)	232, 275		281-282		279-285, 296-306	279-284	284	306	316-317	319
Tebekawene (320, 326)		321	334		338	336	337	338		340
Azemaroti (343)		345		351	351-370			370	372-375	375
Smallpox King (375)		375-376			377-386	377	385	386		388

he simply picks an herb from a nearby bush and blows it into the air, and the hero and his team follow him at once to his home (184).

Two characters from the post-revenge fights—Azemaroti (aided by his mother, Azema) and Odogu—may be fitted into this mode, but there is something elliptical in their introductions. Although Okabou gives us a horrid picture of them, Azemaroti and Azema, unlike most other opponents, pretend at first to be gracious hosts to Ozidi and Oreame (344-49). In Odogu's case, we are prepared for his tough encounter with Ozidi by the news that both men received their powers from the same source, the wizard Bouakarakarabiri (232). But Odogu is not at home when Ozidi calls. Ozidi carries on an ill-starred romance with Odogu's wife that is interrupted by his return, so the narration of their fight is deferred to the next night (275).

A third mode of introduction is by a signature tune, sometimes sung by the character himself announcing his presence. This mode is the most aesthetically effective, for it offers a lyrical relief from the dominant narrative voice of the performance. Indeed, practically every major character in the story, even the idiot Temugedege, has some sort of signature tune in the panegyric mode, indicating that the narrator is using material inscribed in the folk tradition. Thus Agbogidi is greeted as an imperceptible man-killer (67)⁴; Badoba is addressed as “the owner of fights” (150); Akpobrisi “goes to war naked” (136); Tebesonoma is an indefatigable fighter (236); Odogu is touted as “the one and invincible” (278); the Smallpox King, who comes attended by a well-manned frigate, is heralded by a paddling song (376); and so on. The recognition accorded these figures by the folk tradition is evidently intended to warn us that they are not push-overs; Ozidi will be tested to the full.

After the introduction comes the challenge to fight, proffered by either the Ozidi-Oreame team or their opponents. The schema shows that by far the majority of the challenges are made by the opponents. True, as aggrieved persons determined to avenge the hero's father, and given the superabundance of resources available to them, Ozidi and Oreame are driven by an ungovernable urge to fight, sometimes euphemistically expressed as a desire to go out and “play.” But the burden of provocation is put mostly on their opponents, no doubt as a way of presenting the Ozidi family as having no hand in the collapse of the social order.

So Okabou makes Ozidi's first five opponents (assassins) guilty of drawing him out to a fight. In other cases, the hero and his grandmother

⁴ Agbogidi is described as “death not touching hands, not touching legs,” in other words, as death that kills without its victim feeling anything happening.

bear the burden of provocation, but these may be defended. Fingrifin is easily recognized by Oreame as one of the culprits (“another one of the champions” [182]), the first person she and Ozidi encounter in their anger over the way Ofe gave them the slip and deferred their fight with him. Fingrifin, in turn, is incensed because Oreame, anxious to round up as many of the assassins’ accomplices as possible, persistently teases him to reveal the details of the assassination; when she discovers how much he knows and to what extent he may be involved, she throws in words of abuse, which infuriate the Iron Man who then imprisons them with a spell and takes them off to his house.

In Ofe’s case, it is clear the revenge is incomplete as long as he is at large. Okabou succeeds in portraying him as a man driven by a troubling sense of guilt and fear of the team now come to avenge his old victim: he continually pushes his lieutenants to take turns in facing Ozidi before he does, at one point causing one of them (Badoba) to complain about the way Ofe has created the whole problem (146). Ofe continues to postpone his fate, even disappearing under the earth for seven days; but the avengers finally draw him out to face the inevitable justice.

Having disposed of the assassins, Ozidi and Oreame emerge as the supreme powers in the society. They therefore incur the resentment of other forces, of a far less human order, who have long claimed such a position and will not brook competition. One by one they come out of their enclaves to test the claims of the team whose reputation has reached them from citizens of Orua fleeing into the bush. Of the six fights that define their post-revenge career, Ozidi and Oreame are responsible for provoking two: with Odogu and Azemaroti. The contest with these characters seems inevitable. They come supported by their mothers and so are locked within the same mystical equation as the hero; in Odogu’s case, we are actually told (232) that he and his mother Agonodi have acquired their powers from the same wizard (Bouakarakarabiri) who fitted out Oreame and Ozidi. Interestingly, although the latter can no longer stem their bellicose will, they provoke Odogu and his mother not by outright challenge but indirectly, as with Fingrifin.

The provocation is dressed in the imagery of sexual lust on these three occasions. To Fingrifin, Ozidi and Oreame appear as a breathtakingly sexy couple who lure his attention. By the time we get to Odogu, Ozidi the strongman has clearly matured in sexual appeal if not activity. This time he is out strolling with his musical attendants, when he chances upon his enemy’s wife and enters into a romance with her; it is interrupted when Odogu returns, but resumed later when the hero has disposed of another opponent, Tebesonoma. In Azemaroti’s case, Ozidi and Oreame are again dressed as a sexy couple who, while out for a walk, are offered hospitality

by Azemaroti and his mother Azema; Oreame's charm captivates Azemaroti but draws his mother's envy. Given the mystical value the Ijo attribute to a mother's backing of her son's wrestling matches (Okpewho 1983:107-8), these mother-son teams are set to settle once and for all the issue of superiority in the confrontational culture of the story. So, although they provoke their opponents by their appearance, Ozidi and Oreame are simply catalysts in a clash that was meant to be.

The next stage in the schema is the warning signs, the uneasy instincts felt by either side about impending dangers. Okabou has an interesting formula for presenting these signs: usually, the character encounters a stumbling block or a failure in some scheme. Oreame is frequently represented as consulting the oracles for a client just when Ozidi, out to play with his attendants, meets a prospective opponent; as the opponent proceeds to deal with the unprotected company, Oreame's oracular symbols go into disarray as a warning that her grandson is in trouble. The opponents themselves experience an interesting array of presentiments. Agbogidi, Azezabife, Ogueren, and Ofe have trouble donning war gear that has served them well before; the Scrotum King continually stumbles along, and has trouble steadying the pipe in his mouth; Ebeya and Azema-Azenaroti are overcome by sweat and must plunge into a stream for a hapless swim. These warning signs appear in eleven of the story's fourteen fights. Characteristically, in the hero's fights with the assassins and their accomplices—from Agbogidi to Ofe—it is the enemy who, being the "guilty" parties in the matter, feel the full weight of conscience and so are in disarray. On the other hand, in the post-revenge fights the warning signs are more on the side of Oreame as Ozidi's champion. Evidently this is because, at this point, the hero's career has taken a turn from the initial program of revenge for which he had some justification.

We should be careful, however, in pressing our ethical reading of this later career. It may be more meaningful to argue that in their fights with the assassins the avengers are mentally prepared and know quite well what to expect, though on a few occasions Oreame may not yet have procured the items necessary for meeting the challenge. In the post-revenge fights, as the one with Azema-Azemaroti amply reveals, Oreame and Ozidi hardly know what to expect, and so are caught thoroughly unawares.

The next four stages of the schema entail the actual fighting and killing episodes of the story. The confrontations vary in length, for a variety of reasons. For instance, in ten out of the fourteen fights the hero is shown to be in a lot of trouble at the onset until Oreame comes to his aid, either by procuring an antidote that resuscitates him from coma or even death or by summoning resources that neutralize the opponent's superior control of

events. Ozidi's fight with Azezabife offers a good example. The latter is so terrifying that Oreame flies up to God (Tamarau) to defend the family's mission of revenge, and is consequently reassured, though she gets no actual aid (82-83). Later on, Azezabife releases such a powerful whirlwind that "Ozidi passed out for him to pummel" (67); but Oreame soon swoops in, stills the whirlwind with her fan, and whips the unconscious hero back to life; the hornblower sounds the call to action, and Ozidi's bowels resound with the tumult that usually summons his killing rage. But Azeza continues to fight with mounting fury until he cuts off Ozidi's head, an event the audience greets with an "ululation" (94). Matters have clearly come to a head! Oreame whips Ozidi's head back into place and parries magic with Azezabife, until she is able to procure the taboo objects that finally set the Half Man up for Ozidi to cut down (95-96).

Other fights are long for other reasons. Take the fight with Ogueren (105-26), Ozidi's most physically imposing and intimidating opponent: a giant of twenty arms, twenty legs, and other horrendous organs; a warrior whose sword is as enormous as Ozidi's and just as unwieldy (111). Although Oreame consults the oracles and discovers Ogueren's taboos (109-10), when she uses them against Ogueren they fail (114). That it takes the avengers so long to finish Ogueren (22 pages) may be due partly to Ogueren's long established iconic place in the mythology of the region (Okpewho 1998:19-23) and partly to the physical impediments of his size in this story, as well as to the audience's response to the narrator's representation of him. The fight with Ofe (175-201, intermittently) is arguably the longest Ozidi has with the assassins, partly because Ofe is the leader of the pack but especially because of his trickster-like tactics, transforming himself into various forms in order to avoid defeat. Of the post-revenge fights, as we have observed, Odogu's is the longest, partly because of the audience's reactions to the salacious details of Ozidi's romance with Odogu's wife and partly because of the mystical complications in a match between two mother-son teams fitted out by the same wizard. The fight with the Scrotum King (218-29) owes its length just as much to the audience, whose laughter continually pushes the performer to exploit the comic potential of the giant's ponderous movements.

The final stages of this sequence involve Ozidi's killing of his opponent and dumping of the victim's head in the shrine-house, thus increasing his own powers. Next follows a victory lap, in which the power-hungry hero scours the family's premises and harries the idiot king, his uncle, who pleads that the people get rid of the boy so the old man can have peace. The harrying of Temugedege does not occur in every stage, but is

nonetheless a notable feature of the plot.⁵ Finally, in practically every episode Ozidi stashes away his sword after the victory lap, and cools off. The respite is brief, for he is invariably rendered restless by inaction, so that he goes out for a “play” that comes either as a disguised search for more fights, or (as in the post-revenge fights) as a baiting that draws fresh challenges to his supremacy.

The Episodic Structure

Does the above scheme constitute a stable story-line? Sadly, there is no record of other performances of the story by Okabou. But given the seven-day format traditionally enjoined on the narration, and given the basic similarities between the encounters, there is ample potential for a switching of episodes. We could even say that, in performances of this kind, episodic looseness may be a strength rather than a weakness to the extent that the narrator is beholden as much to his audience as to the tradition he serves. The appeal of episodes like the fight with the Scrotum King shows that beyond the sober dictates of ritual—which we may ignore in this instance, since Okabou performed the tale outside of the traditional religious setting—the narrator is primarily an entertainer. As such, he is free to order his material in a way that affords the maximum delight to his audience, so long as he does not engage in blatant violations of cultural codes, especially as regards the initial and terminal moves that frame the story.⁶

Okabou has also been sensible in respecting the seven-day format of narration, which helps safeguard the episodic structure of the tale. Although

⁵ That Ozidi harries the old man even before his main fights begin—after slashing the wives of Ofe and Azezabife to bits (63, 72)—demonstrates the *kunstsprache* of the oral narrative formula: his killing of the women is marked with the same triumphalism as his killing of his opponents. Here, as later, Temugedege calls for the removal of the boy from the community.

⁶ I have discussed narrative episodocity in Okpewho 1979a:217-20; 1983:180, 186. Compare Fleuckiger who, in discussing the epic traditions of Middle India, argues the episodic selectivity of performers against collectors’ emphasis on the linear movement of tales: “The *performed* epic in India is sung in episodes, with the assumption that audience members frame the performance both within the larger epic story (oral tradition) as well as within the folklore repertoire of which it is a part. . . there may be episodes that exist only in the oral tradition, and not in performance at all” (1999:133-34). See also Blackburn and Fleuckiger 1989:11, Foley 1991:10-13, and Nagy 1996:77-78.

he is far away from Orua and therefore free from much of the ritual protocol traditionally attending the re-enactment of the Ozidi myth, he has kept his eye on the movement of time and tried to observe the methodical breaks between fight episodes, letting us know at the end of each encounter that the story as far as he knows it is over!

Okabou does not always employ the peroration; sometimes he is forced by circumstances to postpone it until the next evening. The formula first occurs at the end of the killing of the wives of Ofe and Azezabife in Night One (57), but is given in its more elaborate form at the start of Night Two (60).⁷ It is again observed strictly on Night Three, concluding the fight with Badoba (155); Night Four, after the fight with Ofe (203); and Night Seven, with the disposal of the Smallpox King (388-89). On other nights, however, the termination comes unceremoniously, or is staggered. The peroration formula does not occur on Night Two, nor Night Five; instead, the performance on these nights concludes with a song or songs that technically serve as a termination code. The next evening, however, Okabou begins his performance with rhetorical courtesies in which he recapitulates the *terminus ad quem* of the night before; thus the narration of Night Two is formally perorated at the start of Night Three, while Night Five is perorated after Okabou's self-introduction on Night Six (273).

Two things happen on Nights Six and Seven that suggest a conflict between termination by episode and by time. At the end of Ozidi's fight with Odogu on Night Six, there is some foot-dragging by Okabou (318-20) that indicates that if he had a choice he would terminate the night's performance with that episode. But he seems to have been pressured by a spectator to carry on (320). We are then introduced to the next episode, the fight with the head-walking monster Tebekawene. Shortly thereafter (321), Okabou again indicates his intention to cut the narration and continue the next day, but for some reason—was he possibly given signals?—he carries on with the Tebekawene episode until a song (by his orchestra) celebrating Tebekawene's threat to bear off the hero to his home brings the night's performance to an end (323). The episode is continued on Night Seven, but ends rather early, prompting one spectator to observe that "it wasn't much of a performance this time!" (338). In a brief patriotic moment, some spectators identify their clans of origin. At the end of it all, Okabou utters the usual peroration (339) before proceeding with the next episode, the fight with the mother-son team of Azema and Azemaroti. The actual fighting is

⁷ Clark-Bekederemo tells us (59, n. 62) that the peroration is in accord with Ijo rhetorical practice.

one of the longer ones (351-70); here again, as in the fight with Odogu, we are dealing with the mystical charge in a contest of charms between supporting mothers. But this is the seventh night of the performance, when the entire program must end. Hence the terminal episode, the fight with the Smallpox King, is brief (377-86).

The conflict between termination by time and termination by episode is due largely to the sheer logistical difficulty of a performance involving the active participation of the audience, and of disposing fourteen episodes across a seven-night format. But every episode is treated with due integrity; so it is conceivable, as Okabou's introduction of the fight with Azemaroti hints, that there are occasions when the performer may abstract one episode or the other for a brief command performance. The peroration formula serves as a mechanism for insuring that each episode stands by itself, and even that episodes may be switched between one another, within the overall structure of the tale.⁸

The episodicity of the Ozidi story is also facilitated by the prominence given to songs in the performance. Indeed, the performance is so visibly framed and punctuated by songs that there is a sense in which one could say, adjusting an old line of contention (Lord 1960:68, Wilgus 1973:241-52) ever so slightly, that "the song's the thing." The orchestra that accompanies the storyteller plays more than a subsidiary role. Fully conscious of their appeal as entertainment, the group relishes every opportunity to regale the audience with songs, inserting these in so many refrains that they need to be "called" to a halt, in several Caller-Group interventions, to allow the narrative to

⁸ See Clark-Bekederemo's comment on the tradition of performing the story by episodes (1977/1991:390, n. 10). "I will," Richard Bauman has aptly observed, "take episodes to be major segments of the narrative constituted by time junctures. That is, whereas the flow of the narrative discourse is continuous, the events of the plot may be reported discontinuously, set off from each other by intervals of elapsed time that go unreported in the narrative" (1986:90-91). Although we are not specifically told this, Clark-Bekederemo seems to have aided the narrator's recapitulation of the previous night's *terminus* by playing him back some of the relevant portions of the recording. Cf. Charles Bird on Mande singers' recapitulations after rest (1972:283). That Milman Parry could not see through his project of investigating "the singer's rests" in South Slavic narratives is most regrettable: see his abstract for the project (1971:420) and his notes toward assessing the implications of these performance conditions on the Homeric texts (451-61). Citing discussions of this subject by various scholars (including Albert Lord), Foley offers a carefully argued and persuasive analysis (1990:284-88) of a relevant passage taken from a narrative in the Parry Collection of South Slavic oral epic.

continue.⁹ Perhaps, in many of these instances, the orchestra is trying to give the overtaxed narrator some ventilative breaks or an opportunity to tie the threads of the narrative together. But one effect of the frequency of songs is to create some stress between story and song and, on occasion, to force some dislocation of the narrative logic.¹⁰

A prominent role of these interspersed songs is to frame the narrative by providing convenient points for beginning and ending successive fight episodes as well as each night's performance. There are relatively few songs on the first night, evidently because the performance is trying to find its proper momentum and key for the performer-audience relationship; the night ends with a song which runs to nine choruses (58). Night Two begins with a Caller-Group interaction that sets the tempo and (perhaps along with a replay of some of the tape) helps the narrator find the point where he left off the previous night; Night Two ends with some singing. From Night Three onwards, the opening gambits include a song or songs. Almost invariably, each night also ends with music and singing: there is an ample flourish of songs at the end of Night Four, no doubt celebrating the fall of the last and leader of the assassins, Ofe the Short (202-5). Within each fight episode songs are performed at significant moments. Prominent among them are songs of the kind Hymes has called "manifestations of identity and particular power" (1981:127), here used as signature tunes for introducing various characters in the story: for instance, the hero's opponents enter the fray with songs announcing their reputation (67, 150, 236, etc.), and the witch Oreame

⁹ In many instances, Clark-Bekederemo indicates how many choruses of a song are performed (e.g., 9, 25, 67, 108, 129, 143). At other times, he simply tells us that a song is repeated "several times" (e.g., 171, 199, 239, 296, 325, 382). But sometimes he suppresses the frequency of repetitions, and simply uses dots (e.g., 278) to leave things to our imagination! On the role of songs in encapsulating the subjects of episodes in these epic narratives, see Okpewho 1979a:84. Bird (1972:289-90) sees Mande epics as "consisting of a series of songs tied together by narrative links," and proceeds to enumerate the eight songs that define the key segments of the *Kambili* epic (Bird et al. 1974).

¹⁰ On page 195, the orchestra performs the song of the *seven* virgins or "water maids," which is really the traditional tune that accompanies the leading of seven young girls to the beach at the start of each festival day (in Orua). We may excuse the use of the figure seven in the ensuing scene—Oreame recommends that the fight with Ofe be suspended for *seven* days, during which she consults *seven* oracles to discover the secrets of Ofe's strength—as having been associatively forced on the narrator's mind by the song. But how do we explain Oreame's later demanding the same song of the hardly musical Ozidi (196): what purpose would the song serve in the fight between the two combatants?

frequently flies to Ozidi's rescue to the accompaniment of songs bearing witness to her powers (73, 165, 284, 339, etc.). Other songs underline certain issues germane to the story—such as the relationship between killing and the shrine-house (101), or the counterpoint between town and bush herbs (123)—or else herald Ozidi's final slaughter of his enemy (168, 267, 385, etc.) and harrowing of his idiot uncle (84, 128, etc.).

Thematically, therefore, many of these songs are relevant to the development of the plot. But in many other instances, the songs are hardly related to the moments at which they occur, and so perform little more than interludic functions. For instance, when Ozidi and Oreame go looking for Tebesonoma's sister, Oreame transforms herself into a fetching beauty because her real features terrify those who look upon her; her new aspect draws greetings and admiration. At this point, the orchestra interjects a song ("Ayanma, our father...") with no obvious connection to the scene, and carries on until a Caller-Group intervention restores the integrity of the plot (248-49). The potential for disruption is more evident in an earlier episode. As he approaches to take on Ozidi, the Scrotum King relishes the thought of carving up the hero and roasting him for lunch, puffing on his pipe with premature delight. Here the chorus performs a song that laments the passing first of Ozidi (no doubt, the hero's father) and then of Atazi, legendary narrator of the Ozidi story. When Okabou resumes his narration it is Atazi's name, rather than Ozidi's, that comes to his lips before he is corrected (211)!

With so much potential for disalignment, it is a wonder that the story manages to hang together. But how well does it? Is every episode really where it belongs in the discernible build-up to the terminal episode, the conflict with the Smallpox King? Sometimes, indeed, we wonder at the position accorded one or another episode within the montage. Take Ofe, Tebesonoma, Odogu, and Azemaroti, four figures who give Ozidi the more protracted fights of his career. As suggested above, the position awarded Ofe is defensible: as the leader of the assassins, he should take the field with the avenging hero only after his lieutenants have had their turns. As regards Tebesonoma, the space given to his fight with Ozidi may be justified by the mystical significance of the number of his heads (seven) in Ijo cosmology (Okpewho 1983:280, n. 62).

But what about the positions given to Azemaroti and Odogu? From the Tebesonoma episode onwards, the narrator seems to relish the sexual appeal of the Ozidi-Oreame team as a love couple. Part of the appeal has been encouraged by the growing interaction between Okabou and his audience, but part too is due to the hero's increasing maturation and growing desire for a woman of his own, encouraged perhaps by his encounter with Tebesonoma's sister. Certainly, by the time he has disposed of Azemaroti,

Ozidi can no longer contain this desire, and complains to Oreame that it is not “normal for me to remain without a wife.” Whereupon Oreame strikes the ground with her fan, and out comes a sexy-looking partner for the hero (371-72).

One wonders about the development of Ozidi’s sexual instincts. His romance with Odogu’s wife is broached before his fight with Tebesonoma, but receives full treatment after he has disposed of the monster. Why does Okabou wait for two more fights—first with Tebekawene, where the sexual interest is silent, then with Azemaroti, where it is fully exploited in Oreame’s disguise as an alluring beauty—before filling the hero with a restless sexuality? Would it not have been more effective to make Odogu the last figure Ozidi faces before Smallpox? If we see the sexual awakening of Ozidi as the final point of his maturation, the peak of power and self-assurance that invites the vengeful envy of Smallpox, why is the fight with Odogu not the penultimate contest? For it is in that fight that Ozidi stands the greatest danger—in nearly divulging to Odogu’s wife the secret of his powers—of being destroyed; here, indeed, the integrity of the myth is most severely tested. Could the narrator have been so goaded by the palpable appetites of his audience that he has sacrificed the logic of climactic progression to the more immediate pressure to develop each episode for its integral appeal?¹¹ Or was there greater logic in letting the stifled sexuality of the hero build up to a point where he could take it no more?

Unifying Links

These are no idle concerns. However loose the episodic structure of a story, and however much they are forced by contextual factors to juggle its details, there is little doubt that narrators, like the culture that sustains the narrative tradition, assume a unity to the hero’s career that is continually celebrated, whether in festivals held in the homeland or in command performances before audiences in foreign settings. A fundamental motif on which the entire Ozidi myth is built is restitution. Ozidi senior is killed and his body dishonored by fellow generals who are opposed to his idiot brother

¹¹ Compare Daniel Crowley on Bahamian narrative performances: “The rapport between audience and narrator is so close in some of the stories in the present collection that the narrator is able to ignore the logic of the development of the narrative in favor of exploiting the situations provided by the narrative. If the audience is fond of the style of a particular narrator, they much prefer to see him perform than to hear the story out in all its detail” (1966:141).

being crowned king of Orua. According to Ijo custom, it is the responsibility of surviving relatives of the victim to seek due redress for the dishonor and perform the rites that should restore to the deceased his proper place in the company of the ancestors.

This, says Clark-Bekederemo (liii), is the duty assumed by the hero of our story. Indeed, so persistently do the avengers (Ozidi and Oreame) affirm this duty to justify their acts that, we may assume, the motif of justice will resound throughout the story regardless of the order the narrator gives his episodes. Thus, as Azezabife advances to fight Ozidi, the latter only needs to be reminded by Oreame that the opponent is one of his father's assassins for his bowels to start raging (76). As the fight with Azeza continues to tax the avengers' resources, Oreame is forced to fly to heaven to be reassured by the creator (Tamarau or Woyinghi) that justice is on their side (82-83). Thus emboldened, and spurred on by cheers from his team, Ozidi rises to proclaim himself and his mission: "I am Ozidi! I am Ozidi! I am Ozidi! . . . Rest is all I seek for my father. Justice for my father is all I seek" (84). In his fight with Ogueren, Ozidi is roused to fury by Oreame's words, "O Ozidi, demand the inquest of your father!" (120). As they grapple with the elusive Ofe, Oreame goads Ozidi's memory of Ofe's principal role in his father's death: "It's Ofe who is reputed to have carried my father's head. This day I too shall hurl down here your head" (173).

This theme of restitution is extremely prominent in the contest between Ozidi and his final opponent, Smallpox. As the hero labors under the overwhelming pock-shots, the frustrated Oreame exclaims, "Oh, is it this my only child! After doing justice by his father, is it this wicked evil disease will come and kill my child!" (379). In time, however, Ozidi and Oreame rise to the challenge and destroy Smallpox and his retinue of ailments with the same bravura that saw them through earlier predicaments. His duty done, Ozidi picks up his wife for a final victory lap devoid of the gore-blinded menace of earlier episodes, then surrenders his avenging sword to be put away for good by Oreame. "Those who killed my father," he says, "I have now taken them all, my mother...!" (397). Yet so deep is the impress of the idea of restitution and justice on the narrator's mind that he seeks it even in the motives of Ozidi's opponents. Each of them is, of course, determined to halt the upstart's ambition to "become a hero in this city" and wreck the opponent's "title claims" (100). As the assassins fall one after another, the program of nipping the upstart in the bud is taken up by the post-revenge monsters from the forest, several of them presenting themselves not as rivals to Ozidi's claims but as self-appointed defenders of a once-proud city now all but annihilated by the hero and his grandmother.

The case is graphically, if comically, put by the bumbling Scrotum King (225):

“For oppressing all Ado¹² I thought to kill him, to go there and capture him to kill, and yet you are knocking my pipe off my hand. When I smoke my pipe in my house, I usually smoke it without disturbance Am I the one in the wrong in this fight? Have I the guilty hands in this fight? Do you then approve of his sack of Ado?”

Although he has private designs for Odogu, Tebesonoma prefers to postpone them until he has disposed of Ozidi and Oreame, who he hears “have killed so many that they have become such a problem in Ado” (237). Smallpox is incensed because he has been told, “out there, there lives a man so powerful that he has executed everybody in town . . . completely laid waste what was once a proud capital city, and now it is said he lives there alone with his mother” (375-76).

The passages cited above belong, admittedly, to the larger formulaic design of the story, and may be judged just as amenable to an episodic as to a unitary conception. But there are certain details of a largely syntagmatic order that help Okabou to achieve a consistency in his presentation of characters and events and so preserve the linear logic of a unified plot. Here I am referring to cases of back-referencing that, for a story of this scope performed over an extended period, argue a considerable presence of mind on the part of the narrator. Some of these are simple enough. Take the scene in which Oreame has a hard time finding the proper taboos to Azezabife’s power, especially because the assassins, forewarned by Ozidi’s murder of their wives, have consulted thoroughly about the hero and prepared themselves to meet his challenge (71). In the actual fighting between Ozidi and Azezabife, we are told thrice that it was the latter who struck the first of the cudgel blows that killed the hero’s father (82, 89, 94).

¹² “Ado” is the ancient kingdom and city-state of Benin, which flourished from about the tenth to the nineteenth century and exerted a strong military and other influence over most of the southwestern and delta parts of what is today Nigeria. During the period of the kingdom’s social and political turmoil, in the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, life became so insecure that many groups fled Benin city to settle in faraway places, carrying with them memories of Benin in a variety of oral traditions. Okabou follows many storytellers like him in invoking the name “Ado” as the site of the story he is telling, often drawing corrections from Ijo members of his audience asserting the native Ijo homeland Orua as the proper site of the story. See Okpewho 1998:1-26 for a detailed discussion of the place of Benin in the mythology of the old Benin “empire.”

The detail that Ofe is the bearer of the victim's head (10) is recalled at least four times during his protracted battle with Ozidi (137, 145, 170, 172).

Certain references are, however, widely enough separated to argue a credible sense of unified focus. For instance, in fitting the boy-hero with charms needed to ensure his invincibility, Bouakarakarabiri slaps seven potfuls of potions and other items down his bowels (Night One, 31). Much later, when, during his prolonged fight with Ofe, Ozidi complains of hunger and Oreame conjures up an abundance of food, we are told "he hardly ate much of the food before his belly filled up. So many were the pots in his stomach" (Night Four, 159-60). Or take the striking resemblance between the hero and his father (13), which is remarked even by his witless uncle, Temugedege (41). In assuming his father's name as well as his physical looks, it seems logical that Ozidi would also inherit his father's inner qualities. Hence, in the equally prolonged fight between Ozidi and Odogu we hear a statement that recalls a much earlier scene in which Ozidi senior is invincible to no other weapon than cudgels (Night One, 7-8): "Remember, to kill the man, you had to hit him with sticks" (Night Six, 301). Further, Oreame's boast in the fight with Oguerren, namely that she is invincible to anyone's charms (Night Three, 101), re-echoes three times in the fight with Odogu (Night Six, 308, 312, 314), and is invoked by a frantic Ozidi when he discovers that in his blind fury he has struck down both his grandmother and Azemaroti's mother (Night Six, 356).

In his linear propulsion of the story, the narrator receives some help from his accompanists. There are numerous Caller-Group interjections ("O STORY!" "YES!" etc.) throughout the performance. Sometimes it is not clear whether these exchanges come from members of the orchestra or from the audience. Whatever their sources, they seem to have been provided by those sufficiently privy to the details of the story and perhaps the history of the performance.

Such interventions serve a variety of purposes. Many acknowledge or advert to the affective force of certain moments in the story, as in that tragic scene when Orea (Ozidi's real mother) wails "over the head of her husband on her lap" (12), or in that tragicomic romance between Ozidi and Odogu's wife where the woman, in the crude grip of a warrior unschooled in any social graces, cries out to her husband for rescue (288)! Sometimes, too, the Caller-Group exchanges are used for restoring order to the narration following the audience's reactions—with laughter, exclamation, ululation, etc.—to an affective detail: e.g., when the audience laughs at Agbogidi's catching a cold at the mere sight of Ozidi's "man-breaking sword" (68), or when a ululation from the audience greets Ozidi's cutting down his grandmother and Odogu's mother in one fell swoop (307). At numerous

points also, the intervention is used to regain the thread of fabulation after an interval of song by the orchestra (69, 103, 128, 144, 150, 158, 199, 248, 295, 325, 365, etc.).

The Caller-Group exchanges are equally important in aiding the plot development. The exchanges may often be intended to impress upon everyone—not least the collector of the story—that “the best is yet to come”! But when they tell us that the story grows “wide open” (115, 150, etc.), they advert not only to imminent moments but even more to the progressive growth of the story. True, events gather pace as we move from the beginning toward the end of the story, and the narrator increases the scale of monstrosities threatening the hero. But, more importantly, the closer we scrutinize the fabric of the tale, the more we can trace some basic strands of development, especially in the personality of the hero.

The idea of *development* in Ozidi’s personality may seem paradoxical, since he continues to be called a “boy” throughout the story and to be so dependent on Oreame that he is frequently driven to tears as he calls upon her aid. Such instances may be defended by the manifest aims of heroic representation. As I have suggested elsewhere (Okpewho 1979a:103, 259 n.), by keeping the physical stature of the hero at a reduced level, the narrator may be aiming to magnify the dangers the hero faces and so make his victory over them all the more impressive. Despite this manipulation of his image, Ozidi does manifest some growth. We see this first in his confrontation with the Scrotum King, the first of his post-revenge opponents. It seems that, having avenged his father and so discharged his obligations to his family, Ozidi is now set to begin realizing himself as a person in his own right. So much is at least suggested in the physical growth credited to him as he prepares to fight the Scrotum King: “If you saw the previously slender youth, he was now a sturdy and huge man. He had grown quite into a man” (222).

From this point on, Ozidi’s potential as a human being, with certain emotions and some sense of self, begins to emerge. This is evident in the misguided romance with Odogu’s wife, where the hero is revealed as a sexual innocent hopelessly enthralled by the woman’s beauty (232-33):

“Can a woman possess such a figure! You people, look how perfect she is. Yes, yes, yes! All this time one simply wasn’t given any eyes. Oh, how terrible! Was one to remain forever frigid and unmoved?”

The woman is equally infatuated with Ozidi, and soon after he is firmly ensconced on her lap. He does not know how to proceed (“Now how shall we do it?”); in the midst of his fumbling, the hornblower sounds notice of

Odogu's arrival, and the romance is hurriedly aborted, the lovers promising to continue their affair the next day.

The encounter is brief, but the experience of a fixation other than warfare is enough to open the hero's eyes to a hitherto unknown world and bring the warmth of human sensations to a frigid killing machine. This is what gives the next episode, the fight with Tebesonoma, its peculiar interest. Tebesonoma calls a truce in the midst of their contest, asking Ozidi to go to the next town and kill off his (Tebesonoma's) sister before returning to their fight; his excuse is that he is unwilling to leave her and her baby to suffer unprotected in the world. When Ozidi and Oreame finally meet the woman (Egberigbelea) and her child, Ozidi is simply "horrified" (256) by the thought of killing innocent folk, at one point contesting—thanks to a spectator's dramatic input—Oreame's order to finish off the woman (256-57). When he can no longer fight the killing urge, he laments the "terrible world" that has left him to accomplish "nothing but waste, waste" (257). He spares some thought for the woman's homestead as he prepares to take her life—"Come out or I'll wreck whatever there's in your house" (257-58)—and allows her to sing a parting dirge before his sword descends on her neck (258-59).

Ozidi remains bellicose. But now the killing urge is being steadily counterpoised by some humane will, and he begins to assert his interests against the control of his grandmother. Having disposed of Tebesonoma, he returns to the scene of his aborted romance with a woman he is now determined to marry. When his hornblower reminds him of Oreame's warning against his affair with Odogu's wife, he brushes him aside—"Man, be off with you Isn't she already going senile? Do let's go in"—and strides confidently toward his quarry (275-76). The ensuing fight with Odogu proves so tough that Oreame comes to the rescue and whisks away Ozidi and his entire company, including Odogu's wife! When Oreame chides him for disobeying her and causing the outbreak of trouble, he retorts, "If it has to break, let it break" (286). Carnal knowledge breeds a growing sense of self. When Ozidi accidentally knocks out Oreame in the fury of the resumed fighting, he suddenly achieves a clarity of vision he hardly showed when she was very much in charge. The following dispute between Ozidi and his frustrated attendants gains insight from the audience's input (310):

"Isn't there ever a time you can control yourself when possessed? Must you go on raging and raging like a storm?"

Spectator: Look, is that now against the code of conduct?

As it is, had you got to us, you could also have murdered us."

All he could say was that he didn't know himself.

“Do you think I could go and strike my own mother down? I didn’t know what I was doing.”

Ozidi has surely gained in self-awareness and confidence. His next battle is with the head-walking ogre, Tebekawene. While his men are frightened of this figure, Ozidi strides boldly on in total disregard of the terror. “If a man has his head to the ground like that,” he tells them, “it should be easy to split him from trunk to skull. Yes, why then do you speak in fear? I don’t like how you easily get scared. Those legs suspended wide apart in the air, one splitting blow and that should be the end of them.” His men urge retreat, but he is adamant: “Retreat? For him that was impossible” (322). In previous encounters, Ozidi invariably took fright at the approach of these monstrous figures, and rose to assert himself only when Oreame whipped up his spirits with her fan. Now, he appears to be in greater control and to show more confident leadership of his men. When the sky is rocked by thunder and his men worry that there is no house in which to take shelter should they be drenched by rain, Ozidi replies, “There may be no house but the rain won’t melt you. So move on, just push on” (328).

By the time he fights Azemaroti, Ozidi is at the height of his self-awareness as a man. While Oreame fastens to herself all formidable war-gear, Ozidi carefully adorns himself (and evidently his attendants as well) with apparel that announces him as a man of the world (341):

Ozidi with his figure showed to advantage. His vest fitted him to perfection. As for his calves, they were this big. Flat was his belly, and his blackness was all sparkling and pure. And so they all had a bath, dressed themselves, and combed out their hair. There was not an item that Ozidi forgot. In his hand was a handkerchief.

Protracted and exhausting though the fight with Azemaroti and his mother turns out to be, Ozidi does not once cry frantically to Oreame for help, as in his earlier encounters.

Ozidi finally achieves full manhood in his culture by taking a wife, but not without difficulties. Settling into married life can hardly be easy, for in a town whose human population has been pretty much put to rout by the hero’s career of blood, there is no *human* woman left for him to court. When Oreame tries to assuage his restlessness by urging that they go to her hometown to seek “fun,” Ozidi asks, “Yes, but is it normal for me to remain without a wife?” (371). Whereupon she strikes the earth with her fan and conjures him an exceptional beauty. The sex-starved hero loses no time with niceties: “he ejaculated and went directly into her” (372). Although the

martial urge has not quite left him, it is clear his killing days are very nearly over.

This brings us to Ozidi's dastardly, unnatural act in "killing" his uncle, Temugedege. If there is one act that merits the label "excess" that Clark-Bekederemo attaches to all of Ozidi's post-revenge career—a charge I have contested elsewhere (Okpewho 1979a:3-7, 1983:170-74)—it is this one. However, before rushing to condemn the killing of Temugedege, let us consider one aspect of the cultural backgrounds of the Ozidi story that this episode may be straining to echo. As was already suggested, the story may be read as evoking power conflicts in old Benin that forced many communities to migrate in search of a less troubled life elsewhere. In his psychoanalytic study of the old Benin monarchy, Peter Ekeh (1978), contesting both Freud and Fromm, argues the "conscious institutionalization" of revolt in the transfer of power from the aging king to his much younger heir. While the king schemed anxiously to destroy the prince so as to hang on to power, the prince took care to remind the king, by sending him the symbolic gift of a tuft of grey hairs, that it was time for him to quit the scene because he no longer had the potency needed to insure the vitality of the institution.

We may now appreciate the tensions between Ozidi and the incumbent king, his uncle Temugedege who, following tradition, stands *in loco patris* to the hero (40-41, 373). While the hero harrows the idiot king's abode in the shrubbery after his every triumph, a preliminary notice of ejection, the old man frantically appeals to the citizens of Orua to terminate the troublesome young man's life so that he, the king, can live in peace.¹³ The king's impotence is hinted at directly—"I have fathered no child . . . I have found no woman to sleep with"—and metonymically, by his having a soft spot on his head, rather like an infant (375). Ozidi's crumpling of the old man's head may thus be seen as a dramatic transformation of the old Benin symbol of presentation of grey hairs, whereby the prince served notice to the incumbent king that his ruling days were over.

Whether or not Clark-Bekederemo is right about the visitation from Smallpox serving as a purificatory experience (xl) for his "excesses,"

¹³ Most of the harrowing scenes occur in Ozidi's contests with the assassins, perhaps because it is in this segment of the story that its more direct political signification lies. In the other two places where the harrowing occurs, the contests with Odogu and Azemaroti, is there something in the mystical mother-son combinations that hints at political implications in the image of controlling females among the Ijo, a traditionally matrilineal culture? For an analysis of gender and power relations in Ijo myth and society, see Okpewho 1983:137-48.

including the killing of Temugedege, we have a clear case here of an antecedent culture fossilized within a later outlook. It is equally clear that the logic of Ozidi's triumph over the controlling forces in Orua is that he will reign supreme. In preparation for his role as king, it is necessary for Ozidi to divest himself of the more mechanical, preternatural qualities of heroism defined by an uncritical attachment to the witch Oreame. The progressive humanization of Ozidi, culminating in his marriage (despite the odd circumstances), is evidently the allowance made within the formal movement of the story for a transformation of the hero from the fantastic world of brute force to the real world of responsible leadership.¹⁴

Texture, Text, and Context

In humanizing Ozidi, the storyteller is aided in no small measure by the interventions of the audience. Here we should acknowledge yet again the role of contextual factors not as irrelevant contingencies, as formalist and structuralist ideologies would urge, but as dynamic aids in the realization of narrative form. While the narrator, bearing more than a fair share of the emotive charge of the Ozidi story, endeavors to exploit fully its romantic potential, the audience tends to check his flights of fancy and keep him on the ground of rational, palpable reality. Two examples of the audience's role in this humanistic program will do. First, amid the prolonged but doomed romance between Ozidi and Odogu's wife, one spectator is driven to observe, "All this labor to lay a woman!" (294). This comes at the point where the woman has asked Ozidi to tell her the secret of his powers and Ozidi, drawing from his shrine the all-conquering sword, is torn between his tender feelings for her and the mechanical urges of a sword in hand. It is a charged moment in every sense—mystically, emotionally, dramatically—but the spectator's reading of the tension puts the emphasis squarely on its emotional (carnal) interest.

The second example comes from the last scene of the story. Having disposed of Smallpox and his gang, the hero hands his sword over to

¹⁴ Elsewhere, I have pursued the analysis of narrative "development" in *The Ozidi Saga* by the formular approach (Okpewho 1979a:154-59, 173-79). For other perspectives on expansion and development, see Harold Scheub's concept of the "expansible image" in Xhosa *intsomi* (1970, 1972:124-34, 1975, and 1977:61-76). The concept has been influential in the work of Scheub's former students, especially Cosentino (1982:34-55), Cancel (1989:33-54), and Sekoni (1990). For my critique of Scheub's structural approach to these image patterns, see Okpewho 1979b.

Oreama to be put away for good, vowing to seek no more fights. In the happy prospect that society will now be spared the terrors of the hero's killing rage, a member of the narrator's orchestra comments, "Where there's no love the bowels show no love" (387-88). This statement could be read as an attempt to justify the bloody career of Ozidi: things could have taken a different course in Orua, had the hero any choice but to parley with his society in the only language it understood. More importantly, the statement seems to lend a touch of earthly wisdom to a tale that is otherwise short on proverbs and to ground the extraordinary career of the hero within the scheme of human expectations. It is therefore no surprise that the scene concludes with Ozidi "bending forward and catching a handful of earth," a symbolic gesture whereby he proceeds to renounce all further fighting (388).

Several interventions from the audience give notice not so much of a cohesive as of a variegated social outlook, in the sense that each commentator tries to offer a preferred path to representation of the Ozidi story, sometimes in conflict with the path chosen by the narrator. If we look closely at these spectators' comments, we find an amazing multivocality that may be deconstructed along lines of gender and ideology, among others. For instance, amid their interminable sword-play, Ozidi and Odogu are so exhausted that, though they are still standing on their feet, they can hardly lift their arms to parry any further; yet their mothers keep urging them on. A spectator laments, "Look at them playing with children born with such labour!" (303). Clark-Bekederemo does not identify these interpolators by name, but such a statement is more likely to have been made by a woman than a man, and if she were to tell the story herself she might be less attracted to details of blood-letting than a male like Okabou has been.

Or take that scene where Oreama and Ozidi stride confidently into the domain of Azema and Azemaroti. A spectator, cherishing the prospect of confrontation, exclaims, "Power!" (343). As his next statement indicates, the narrator is really playing down the menace intended by Ozidi and Oreama, who have come disguised as lovers out on a stroll. But our spectator obviously wants to witness the dominance of the Ozidi-Oreama party—a reflection, perhaps, of the climate of civil strife then prevailing in western Nigeria (Ibadan, the site of this performance, was the regional capital). Although these comments help to guide the tale toward a more temporal, realistic outlook, it is obvious that they suggest multiple strategies for achieving such a goal.

What we have here, therefore, is a tale of two structures. On the one hand, there is a *microstructure* that not only facilitates the organization of the plot into seven parts, however random the disposition of episodes, but especially accommodates the multivocal inputs from the audience. The

microstructure is especially hospitable to the unstable composition of the audience across the seven nights of the performance. As with any program of free association held over an extended period, such a performance could hardly hope to count on a stable and homogeneous attendance. Even if we agree that one set of attendants makes a homogeneous input into the plot development of the tale in a given day, they may not all be there the next day; some will likely be replaced by others with different orientations and outlooks. The change in composition will inevitably engender occasional intellectual stresses between the narrator and the new set of spectators, causing adjustments to be made so that the performance for that day is realized with some level of success. In assuming responsibility for their task “the performers of tradition,” as Hymes has properly observed, “are [more often] masters of adaptation to situation” (1981:86).

On the other hand, there is a *macrostructure* that sustains the overall logical, ethical, and other design to which the society subscribes whether individually or collectively, whether consciously or unconsciously. True, if we were to ask a random sample of citizens in Orua what the Ozidi story meant for them, we would very likely find some who made the might of Ozidi the pivot of their response, others the grotesque features of Ozidi’s opponents, others the unrivaled magic of Oreame, while for certain others the story made sense not so much in defining a proud heritage as in distinguishing the obsessions of the past from the needs of the present. Despite these divergences, there remains an immanent backcloth of culturally determined signs from which the story is perceived or told, however much it has to adjust itself to suit the dialogic imperatives of performance on any range of occasions.

The relation of smaller to larger units of discourse is, of course, a longstanding concern in humanistic scholarship. Mikhail Bakhtin has drawn useful parallels between “the work in all its wholeness and indivisibility” and “the diversity of the elements that constitute it” (1981:255). Kenneth Pike has offered an equally useful chart, in our study of linguistic and cultural behavior, between an *emic* approach from a situation-specific perspective and an *etic* approach from the perspective of larger behavioral laws (1967). And Foley has, in several publications (1991, 1995, 1999), quite lucidly explored the relations between the essential building blocks of narratives (*formulas* and *themes*) to the larger referential systems that define various European oral traditions.¹⁵ My recognition of the relation of

¹⁵ On the relation between microstructure and macrostructure in oral traditional performance, see also Bauman 1986:90-94, 112-13 and Foley 1991:13. Bauman calls episodes “macrounits of narrative plot” (94), while I have treated them here as part of its

microstructure to macrostructure in *The Ozidi Saga* borrows from this tradition of thought a mechanism for appreciating the place of Okabou's nonce performance act within the larger, immanent tradition to which members of his audience responded; for the stresses between the two are responsible, to a considerable degree, for the dynamism revealed by Okabou's text.

Specifically, my analysis has tried to show the level of complexity involved in an event when so many people participate in it not as sworn members of a cult but on the basis of free association, and when, as the performance progresses day after day, their individual outlooks steadily assert themselves in the form of interpolations that affect not simply the texture of individual episodes but indeed the general drift of the plot. Is there a chance that a nonce act such as Okabou's could collapse under the weight of these interventions? The people who make those comments during his performance are by no means trying to bring him down—far from it. In their patriotic joy at participating in the re-enactment of a national heritage, they are more likely anxious to project not only its multivalent potential but especially the dialogic texture of their verbal arts, a quality shared by other cultures and traditions, as we see, for instance, in studies by Dennis Tedlock of Zuni (1983, 1999) and by Charles Briggs of Mexicano performances (1988).¹⁶

Whatever insights are yielded by the dialogic texture of Okabou's performance must be credited largely to the good sense shown by Clark-Bekederemo in prompting the event. There was, for instance, much wisdom in siting the performance in Madam Yabuku's private residence. Since the Ijo matron was a regular client of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation station at Ibadan, which she frequently obliged with song and dance groups sponsored by her, Okabou's performance might possibly have taken place at

microstructure. The difference here lies mainly in the vastly larger scope of *The Ozidi Saga* in comparison to the conversational yarns Bauman collected in Texas.

¹⁶ Compare the Herskovits' experience with a Dahomean narrator who was somewhat out of sorts when, in the presence of the recording American scholars, he could not get from his native fellows the sort of responsorial rapport he received in normal storytelling sessions (Herskovits 1958:52). Robert Cancel cites an analogous experience from the Tabwa of Zambia: "One parent, a ward councillor, tried to keep the audience, his family, from singing along with the storyteller, thinking that they were somehow interfering with the purpose of the researcher's recording. The frustration of the storytellers and audience, almost literally forced to sit on their hands, was relieved only after I assured the anxious father that I *wanted* the audience to respond as they normally did" (1989:59). Cf. also Giray (1996:33) on the Jula of Burkina Faso.

the NBC studios there. The choice of Madam Yabuku's residence had at least two advantages. First, NBC would probably not have been able to accommodate a program lasting seven whole days; other options might have vied for the time, and Okabou would have had to abbreviate his material rather drastically. Second, a closed studio would have offered less room than an open residence for the free flow and random attendance of spectators and perhaps their free expression of views. An audience of such a performance would have been entirely out of the traditional dialogic loop, being too limited in the extent to which they could respond to the immanent codes of their tradition: "the rules, frame, all that constitutes the infelicitous context," Foley has said, "will prove impertinent and misleading as the . . . audience tries to fashion coherency on the basis of disparate codes" (1995:48).

Another benefit of having the performance at Madam Yabuku's place was that it enabled Okabou to hold dialogue with other contingencies than the attending audience. From Madam Yabuku's yard, he could more readily conjure contextual factors like telephone poles and local markets (75, 77, 263, 299, 331, etc.)—which enter into his conceptions of size (as of the monsters facing Ozidi) and distance (as of the ground covered by their paces)—than he could have done from a closed room in a radio station. In appropriating these elements into his tale, Okabou has practically erased the line that Henry Glassie sees between "the eye of the beholder" and "the mind of the creator" in determining what counts as *context* in performance studies (1982:33).¹⁷ Above all, the open air theater-in-the-round offered Okabou the imaginative scope for achieving a text of truly classic status. Performing his tale far from the traditional festival arena back in Tarakiri Orua, which might have placed a different set of constraints—e.g., concentrating more on the *dromena* than the *legomena* of the Ozidi myth—he has nonetheless found in Clark-Bekederemo's recording project the recipe Bauman theorizes for Homer's success: "when the epic singers were freed from the usual contextual factors that constrained their performance, and placed in contexts whose very purpose was to allow them to display their talents, they took advantage of the situation to exercise their full virtuosity in the production of long, elaborate texts" (1986:106).

¹⁷ Focused discussions of the concept of *context* are numerous. Following early positions stated in Georges 1969, Ben-Amos 1971, Wilgus 1973, and Joyner 1975, *Western Folklore* proceeded to entertain several contributions on the topic, such as Jones 1979a and 1979b, Ben-Amos 1979, Georges 1980 and 1986, Zan 1982, and Bronner 1988. See also Young 1985 and Ben-Amos 1993. Okpewho 1990 highlights the influence of the audience on the performance of *The Ozidi Saga*.

As for the audience, Clark-Bekederemo identifies only three among them by name: “Professor A. Brown, then Professor and Dean of Medicine at the University of Ibadan,” and the film-maker “Frank Speed” of the Institute of African Studies at the university (269), as well as the hostess Madam Yabuku (xxxvii). Otherwise, he speaks only of “some other friends and colleagues” from the university and other non-Ijo in the audience who were obviously not as active as the Ijo in making the occasional interjections but who must have reacted just as visibly to emotional moments in the performance. Although the bulk of the tale had resonance primarily for the native Ijo audience, certain elements in it—like English loan-words on which Okabou was frequently corrected, or images like “the white man’s [second world] war” (227), etc.—had the non-Ijo audience in mind and so made some contribution to expanding the scope of the story’s horizon in one crucial way: balancing the limited patriotic expectations of the native Ijo with the larger cosmopolitan experience of the non-Ijo audience. It is no wonder that the text of the story turned out to be so large.¹⁸

By insisting on going through the entire seven-day format enjoined by the tradition, Clark-Bekederemo thus enabled the coalescence of multidirectional tendencies in a narrative that was seldom performed in its entirety. The narrator’s occasional attentions to the tape recorder (especially 177, 234, 257, 342, 362) certainly indicate that he was not accustomed to the size of the program imposed upon him. But the effort has served him well both in fleshing out, with help from various contextual factors, the formal outlines of a cherished legacy and in lending it the stamp of his own individual genius. This article has tried to show evidence of that genius in the formal control Okabou exercised over an unwieldy and potentially fragile narrative mass.

*Binghamton University
State University of New York*

¹⁸ Dennis Tedlock clinches this point very well in assessing the conscience of Zuni informants who, in their narratives, conjure a larger cultural universe than their more familiar constituencies: “. . . however much the mythographer may try to normalize a performance by gathering a native audience and by building rapport at the level of personal interaction, the presence of a tape-recorder and the eventual goal of publication raise larger questions of what might be called interethnic rapport. The problem of the mythographer is not merely to present and interpret Zuni myths as if they were objects from a distant place and time and the mythographer were a set of narrow, one-way conduits, but as events taking place among contemporaries along a frontier that has a long history of crossings” (1983:292).

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