

Social Drama: Umulumgbe Men Funeral Ritual Performance

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Abstract

Drama is much more a product of the oral tradition than the written tradition because the conceptualization and the execution of the action has generally been an oral activity. The purpose of social drama is to accomplish certain profound requirements in the society which practices it, and the method of execution of the activity is accorded maximum meticulousness. The most salient purpose of a ritual is to reorder things in life; it is a “restorative” experience, an experience of purgation of emotions. The performance of the ritual emerges as the climax of the greater social drama which begins at the moment contravention of existing moral orders is committed. Thus, the Umulumgbe funeral ritual, viewed as a ceremony, is thus a measure aimed at correcting the breaches committed by the deceased, so that, the deceased can rest in peace in the world of the dead. So, the study considers major postulations on the nature and functionality of drama, and particularly the social drama category, in identifying and examining striking features in the performance of this ritual which may suitably be used as key elements of social drama.

Key words: Social drama, Umulumgbe, men funeral ritual, performance, Nigeria

1. Introduction

This is an analysis of a study on a funeral ritual performance for men which I conducted in Umulumgbe, a community in Udi Local Government Area of Enugu State of the Southeast of Nigeria. In this study, I present the features in the performance of the Umulumgbe funeral ritual for men which validate the performance of the event as a social drama. The study critically analyses the key features of the funeral ritual - a post-burial event, in an attempt to draw parallels with mainstream theatrical drama as an imitation of action but more so as social drama.

2.0 The Making of the Umulumgbe Men’s Funeral Ritual as Social Drama

There is a close relationship between rituals and the mainstream theatrical drama in that the later has been traced to have originated from ancient ritual performances. Drama is thus much more a product of the oral tradition than the written tradition because the conceptualization and the execution of the action has generally been an oral activity. The category of the social drama (drama which occupies the space between the real and the imagined because of its close association with myth) is more so the foundation of drama mainly because of its profundity of purpose and method. The purpose of social drama is to accomplish certain profound requirements in the society which practices it, and the method of execution of the activity is accorded maximum meticulousness. The most salient purpose of a ritual is to reorder things in life; it is a “restorative” experience (Jacek Smolicki, 19).

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Aristotle identified a salient element of drama being catharsis; an experience of purgation of emotions. Being an activity of profound intention, social drama is thus performed with carefully crafted art and design (18). This is seen in the way quality of performance in drama is founded on meticulous observation of methodical rules. The rules according to Smolicki hinge on three elements: time, communication and social perspectives of the people who practice it. And so a ritual is an imagined activity which addresses real issues among the people who practice it; a funeral ritual for example is a ceremony for celebrating of the life of a person who has passed on. There is a strong belief in Umulumgbe that the spirits of one's ancestors keep a constant watch over the living, and must be appeased through rituals which is performed during funeral. Ancestors who had lived well, died in socially acceptable circumstances, and were given appropriate funeral rites, were allowed to continue the afterlife in a world of the dead. In Umulumgbe, it is always believed that a person's relative can reincarnate or come back as the person's child or grandchild, and this is why the first child of a family is always given the name of the paternal grandfather (if a boy) or the paternal grandmother (if a girl). Those who died in morally unacceptable circumstances in which funeral rituals are not performed are believed to "return" to the world of the living unless a special ritual is performed by a strong and powerful *dibia* (native doctor). This is because they wander homeless, expressing their grief by causing destruction among their living counterparts.

A funeral performance is very important to Umulumgbe because if any family does not perform it, they will face the wrath of the deceased and the ancestors. A further complication will arise in that another member of the family who will die later will not be feted with a funeral until the pending one is completed. An exploration of the intersection between the Aristotelian criteria of drama: action, character, idea, verbal expression, music, and spectacle (Jeffery Hatcher, 7) and Turner's four phases of social drama: the breach, the crisis, redress and reincorporation, which explain the symbolic presentation of conflict and crisis resolution by use of ritual (Turner 1980, 144), are useful dimensions with which the extent to which an event can be evaluated as social drama. This is because, while Aristotle founds the basic criteria of identifying drama, Turner specifies the key features to which a social drama can be identified and analyzed. Rituals are thus viewed as the "dramas of the living" (Turner, 149). For the ritual of Umulumgbe nature, the play part usually surfaces at the phase of redress and reincorporation, the point when the drama is seeking to resolve. Social dramas disrupt the temporal character of the mainstream drama whose emergence is strictly situated only in the moments of its staging and the whims of the director. For social drama, performance is a continuation and necessity of life; "a spontaneous unit of social process" within a social group (Turner 149), and hence the moment ritual is set to a public ceremony is a finalization phase of a process that had been initiated earlier.

Using Aristotle's maxim that drama is an imitation of action, what makes drama meaningful to human beings is its intersectional occupation of the imagined and the "real"; the occupation of the space between the imitation and the action. It is used as a portrayal reflection on a wide variety of human behaviour, emotions and epistemologies through the use of "masking" (203) as opined by Francis Harding where masking is the "re-presentation of the self" through "suspension of the ordinary" (198). Human beings are made to operate on the reflexive plane of "as if" (Schechner, iv). The imitation and play elements of drama allow expressions and actions which may, in ordinary life be impracticable, to be put to play. The Umulumgbe funeral ritual exhibits this element; it is a site for play of the impracticable (engagement with the dead, spirits and gods), but which seem to fill critical gaps in the practicable aspects of human life (the satisfaction among the participants that life has returned to normalcy after the demise of their member). The art and design of the Umulumgbe ritual conform to four dramatic aspects: characters, conflict, costume, and time and space. These aspects are also intertwined with Turner's four phases of social drama (breach, crisis, redress and reincorporation). This is because as much, social drama is a specific genre of performance; it remains to be understood largely within the domain of all-purpose drama. In the foregoing section, I present an analysis of these dramatic aspects in the ritual and their intersection with Turner's phases of social drama.

2.1 Characters and Characterization in the Umulumgbe Men's Funeral Ritual

These are the symbolically contrived actors who are tasked with the responsibility of bringing characters to life (even the dead) in the ritual. In this ritual, the distinction between the actors and the audience is indistinguishable because everyone is a participant in the event and it is only at key moments when the major actors play prominently. At such times however, the others (audience) are always in support the major actors and thus the term "participant" in the next discussion cuts across the actors and spectators. The actors' roles are specifically defined for the purpose of the execution of ritual. They are governed by a sense of "masked" figurativeness (Francis Harding, 203). The funeral ritual, viewed as a ceremony, is thus a measure aimed at correcting the breaches committed by the deceased.

The performance of the ritual emerges as the climax of the greater social drama which begins at the moment contravention of existing moral orders is committed. The performance of the ritual is the moment when theatrically dramatic aspects are fully employed. Although the participants usually do not consider themselves as acting they are governed by a modality of pretense (Francis Harding, 198). The major participants thus operate in double consciousness. On one hand they are conscious they are their natural selves while at the same time they allow themselves to be transported to act as somebody or something else. The most significant participant in the ritual is the eldest daughter of the deceased (*Nwada*) – whose presence is held with high esteem. The *mwada* include the first born daughter of the deceased or the first born daughter of the eldest son in case of a ritual for a woman. The belief is that *Nwada* “owns” and therefore they play the role of leading the funeral process. The daughter can be represented by a woman from the household if deemed too young to understand the ceremony. Every action is done for or on behalf of the girl or woman, and her whereabouts in the compound during the funeral is guarded by the other women. In the ritual, the daughter is momentarily transported during the performance to the position of *mwada* and although the girl and the audience are aware about her ordinariness, the girl is viewed as representing the deceased. According to Schechner, transportation is the temporary change of one’s consciousness characterized by “entering”, “experiencing” and “return” (13).

Fig 1: The *nwada* in her special funeral attire



Related to the role of the *mwada* is the role played by the first born son of the deceased. He is also specially donned with the necklace of large red beads and his presence symbolizes the presence of his father in the ceremony. Unlike the *mwada*, however, the first born son does not play the role of agency of fulfillment; the symbolization of the presence of his father is basically based on gender and the expected position of the son will be to replace his father in providing needs for the family. The second most important category of actors is the *umuada* which loosely translates to “The daughters of the land” and *Ndi-Nnunyè di* (co-wives). These groups comprise of the aunts, sisters, daughters, nieces and sisters-in-law of the deceased. In the performance of the ritual, they act as the owners of the land in the way they take part in the most fundamental stages of action in the ritual. One of the specific roles of the co-wives is to sing and dance. Song and dance in the ritual appear as a vehicle for communing with the deceased, the ancestors and the gods. As studied by Smolicki, sound is a very important aspect in a ritual because of its emotional powers to express and impress (28). He notes that music has the Aristotelian cathartic power to “carry the burden of unspeakable states of mind” (28). In the Umulumgbe ritual there are many issues that surround the death of an individual. These issues include dissatisfactions, queries, directing blames, confessions, anxiety, wishes, and supplications.

These issues are impracticably uttered ordinarily the funeral and thus music is vested with this function of subtly addressing them in the most effective way. Women being the custodians of singing in the funeral adopt this subtle role and importance; they are vested with the cathartic powers to express their feelings and also to impress the participants of the ritual (the living, the dead and spirits).

Men in the Umulumgbe funeral rituals emerge as minor actors, but whose role in the ceremony is quite crucial. The first crucial role of the men is to support, escort and protect their women in their journey to the home of the deceased, at the funeral ceremony and as the women return.

2.2 Conflict in the Funeral Ritual

The most important element in the action of performance of the ritual is the performance based on conflict. Conflict is the incompatibility between what a character(s) wishes to achieve and what another character(s) or forces aim to achieve. (Hatcher 8). Conflict is one of the main Aristotelian features of drama because it is the basis of the flow of performance. At the same time the flow relates to phases, and thus Turner's four phases of social drama (breach, crisis, redress and reincorporation) are more intertwined with conflict than the other dramatic elements presented in this study. As Hatcher further notes, conflict is the logical connection between the events and the characters which enact the story, and which form an integral part of the plot of drama (8). The major conflicts in the ritual exist between mankind and spirits and also between the living and the dead. Death is seen as a disciplinary measure on the living for contravention of the moral order set and safeguarded by dead. The living are seen in a struggle to abide by the expectations which at times are contravened for example in cases of murder, suicide or illness. There is thus a form of a tussle between the living and the dead. These conflicts form the initial beginning of the ritual. As the performance commence, the aim is to resolve the conflicts. I have illustrated in, the redress section, how the three conflicts are resolved. Conflict is initiated the moment breach is caused. Breach is "the act or result of breaking; break or rupture" (Dictionary.com). In Turner's perspective, breaches are results of contravening the existing moral orders of a social group (Turner 1980, 150). The act is either a severe commission of a wrong or an omission of a right by an individual or a group but whose consequences will be borne communally. Breach is thus the crucial phase of the social drama in the sense that it forms the cradle of the conflict with which the play will be centred on in the process of seeking to resolve it. The breaches include wickedness, failure to take social, cultural and religious obligations, and disruption of moral order. Breaches are either deliberate or accidental, but are usually followed by a retributive crisis. In Umulumgbe death is double-faceted: it can be seen as a key result of breach, at the same time it can be viewed also as breach itself.

From the information I gathered in the field, on one hand, the Umulumgbe believes that every death is planned by gods and ancestors for a reason, and thus, a result of a breach. There are two perspectives of breaches among the Umulumgbe which result in death. One perspective death comes in to eliminate an evil person whose existence among the people is detrimental. The person may be a witch, a murderer, a violator of any sort, or contravening certain moral orders such as taking poison or failing to take care of oneself. Death, thus, comes in to eliminate such a person. The breach in this case therefore is the wickedness of the individual, in that the moral order provided for by the gods and ancestors have been contravened. The other perspective is that death is also a reliever of a good person. In this case death is seen as having done a favour to the departed. This is because life after death is seen as better as and more meaningful than that of the earth and that life after death is a form of rest after turmoil of the earth. This maxim seems to suitably explain why a good person dies. The breach in this case is the dreariness and sufferings of this world meted on a good person; the gods and the ancestors appear to wield dissatisfaction of seeing a good person suffering on earth.

Another way in which breach is manifested in this initial phase of the ritual is death itself. Death is here seen not as an aftermath of a breach but as a breach to ordinary order of existence. Death is a disruption of the flow of life and dire consequences among the survivors and the departed follow after death of someone. Among the living, the tasks of filling the gap left by the departed, the task of burial and funeral and the task of providing for means of livelihood are some of the consequences of the breach.

On the side of the departed, the consequences include the task of settling among the ancestors which implies the task of re-representation of self, according to the expectations of the ancestors. In the song *Egbe egburu akwu* (A kite has carried away a palm fruit) the singer decries the taking of a ripened palm fruit by the kite:

Akwu characha ya ka egbe biara buru
Egbe biara buru
Akwu characha

A ripened palm fruit is what a kite carried away
 A kite came and carried away
 A ripened palm fruit

Death is presented as having two characters. One, death is a scavenger as kite is; it feeds on others' flesh, and so when it strikes the impact is big because it seeks to satiate its hunger. Second, death targets only the ripened fruit.

Meaning that the blow to those who waited upon the fruit is immense. This shows that death is itself a breach; a disruption to the smoothness of normalcy because death strikes when it is most unexpected and aims at the most crucial persons and moments. Death is therefore a vehicle of transformation: states such as the dead, widowhood, and orphanage are made possible by death. These states are more so permanent making the consequences of breach quite critical. From these two perspectives of death, the very origin of an occurrence of conflict goes back to the moment a breach is done. In this case the gods and ancestors are in conflict with either the wicked person, or with the hostility of the world to the good person. Thus, the gods and the ancestors are seen as wielding their programs on earth through dramatic actions. The dramatic actions of death include accidents, murders, sicknesses, old age and even suicides. Conflicts heighten tensions and prepare grounds for action of wielding of the tensions. As such the major players of an action After the phase of breach comes crisis. Crisis encompasses the unpleasant consequences of the breach. Crisis is “a momentous juncture or turning point in the relation between components of a social field” as a result of a breach (Turner 1980, 150). Crisis is about the retributive disruption of normalcy among a social group as a result of breach. The measures are sudden and often unpleasant. For mankind death is seen as a weighty phenomenon that dislocates the flow of life and seems to threaten the existence of those who are still living. As explained by Ezeugwu of Umulumgbe Deity, death is as universal as the Catholic Church and everyone is expected to keenly participate in addressing the crisis. This analogy is meaningful to the people of Umulumgbe because the Catholic Church has spread all over the region.

Crisis is seen as an existential threat and a challenge that must be addressed. At this phase sides are taken and factions are formed (Turner 1980, 150). Among the Umulumgbe, death is a coded message of dissatisfaction from the gods and the ancestors, must be strictly examined to arrive at the cause of the death. The people thus live in a continuous self-search for wrongs which they may have done to the gods and the ancestors so that they seek to redressive measures before it is too late, to settle the dead and the survivors with an “everlasting peace.” Death results in several crises all of which the survivors bear the brunt. Among the Umulumgbe, death means a halt in normalcy and a beginning of trouble to the immediate relatives and even the neighbours. For a case of a man, the widow bears the weight most. This is the time when she undergoes seclusion characterized with hard life and deprivation. It also means hard life to the women of the clan in inspecting and guarding the body and the widow. This is also a moment when resources must be made available to cater for the burial and funeral costs. Then there is the task of dealing with the gap left by the deceased in terms of providing for the orphans and the widow. The song, *Onye ka m n'aya ga ebi?* (Who will I live with?), expresses the crisis of having to reckon with the space left by the departed:

Omwu eh ana m aju omwu m n'onye ga ebi?
Omwu gburu nwokorobia
Omwu gburu nwa-aghobia
Omwu m n'onye ga ebi?

Death eh I am asking death who will I live with?
 Death that kills a young man
 Death that kills young woman
 Death who will I live with?

In a personified tone, the singer is interrogating death in an attempt to come to terms with the crisis brought by the demise. The repetitive tone such as (eh I am asking) implies that death does not listen to mankind. On the other hand the crier appears to accept the fate of death by not asking *why* it has killed a loved one but instead the crier's issue is loneliness (Who will I live with?). This scenario supports the second view among the Umulumgbe that death comes to take a good person away from the troubles of this world. After breach and crisis comes a moment of redress. Redress refers to the “adjustive mechanisms” of seeking to restrain the crisis or effects of the crisis (Turner 1980, 151). It involves a drastic measure such as sacrifice in order to return things to normalcy.

It is about conflict resolution. At this phase the whole group is involved as the crisis appear to threaten the existence of the whole group. The redressive gestures are often ceremonial, but involve the use of both symbolic and real sacrificial paraphernalia. The side which has been wronged or its symbolic representative is appeased often by remorse and prostration. This is the moment when the Umulumgbe engage in the funeral rituals. The following is a description of the funeral rituals for both man and woman, as observed in during the performance, with an attempt to illustrate the dramatic redressive elements of the ritual. As Augustine Akpa who is one of the respondents explains, a funeral is a key redressive strategy of ensuring the welfare of the departed as well as the survivors; it gives the participants a mental assurance that they have given the dead peace and are now free from wrath of the spirits and the dead.

Another illustration to why various factions and sides await the ritual for redress can be seen in the man's funeral where the men from his mother's side set to destroy the house of the deceased. Their move appears to imply that they are accusative at the people responsible for the death of their grandson. They seem to be pointing a finger at the members of the household for the cause of the death. Hence, their fury in seeking to destroy the house, the deceased uncles can be seen as seeking to reprimand their in-laws for the demise. What ensues is a tussle of revenge versus remorse. The hosts plead with them to spare the act, and it is only after a more profound sacrifice, the makeshift house, is made that the aggrieved men descend from the roof top of the house. Again the furious destruction of the makeshift house can be seen as a moment of releasing anger among the stakeholders. It is after the destruction that the situation suddenly eases to normalcy.

After the redress phase comes the phase of reincorporation. This is the repair stage, the moment at which the social group takes an effort to adopt the new changes brought by the breach. It involves a ceremony of realigning states of affairs; filling in situational and philosophical gaps brought by the incident. At this phase the effects of the crisis are directly dealt with by drawing maps of returning to life even at the face of the damages. During such functions every major activity in the neighbourhood, such as farming or going to the market, is halted to pave place and ample time for the execution of the event. The last day of a man's funeral ritual ends with the sounding of the cannon shots. At this time mourners are preparing to leave to their home except the *umuada*. The sacred drum is carried off safely to where it was brought. Then everything is calm with normalcy. The taking away of the sacred drum is a signal to the start of normal life. The taking away of the sacred drum, again, marks the end of one of the three reincorporating strategies among the Umulumgbe. The second reincorporating strategy is carried out the next day after the clan and friends have left. This is usually at the morning of the next *Eke* day. The members of the family shave their heads clean. This is to signify the passing away of bygones. What is expected is the growth of new hair to symbolize new life. The rebirth implies a reincorporation to life. The third and the last, reincorporating strategy involves the widow. This takes place after twelve months (one year). The ending of the period involves the woman inviting a guest to whom she will cook for the first time. The cooking implies a dramatic return to the usual life. In some cases the widow is feted at a church function marked by celebrations. This is to show that the widow has been reborn and usual new life now starts.

The special roles assigned to specific people in the ritual are examples of reincorporation strategies. They are meant to assign new role the individuals to deal with the demise. The first daughter of the departed is being assigned with the task of providing *ibe ikpor ibu* (this is a special animal which the first daughter of the departed presents to the *umuada*). The same case applies to the son who presents *evu eda* to the kinsmen of the departed. They are being made to realize that they will be depended upon in many things in the family just like the *umuada*. The whole action is, thus, a way of dealing with the loss. It is also a way of "ending" the mourning and setting life to normalcy. Again, the process of secluding the widow is an initiation strategy in a bid to enable her to realize she is not to carry out issues like before. She is to take care of the family as a single provider.

2.3 Costume and Props of the Ritual

Costumes and props create spectacle. According to Andrew Sofer, spectacle injects a play with emotional attraction (iii). What cuts across is the efficacious use of imagery being the mental, "idealized cognitive models, scenes and categories from both the universal and culturally determined physical experiences" (Palmer et al, 227).

The participants in the Umulumgbe ritual, however, usually do not regard the items they use as costumes and props because the items are seen as tools of fulfilling a non-fictional activity in life. In a man's funeral, musical instruments are played during the performance of the funeral ritual both as accompaniments to the funeral songs and as symbolic representations of issues. The most significant musical instrument in a man's funeral is the sacred drum (*Ikpá*). The drum is handled with utmost fear and is brought out to be played only during a funeral ritual. As Ezeugwu of Umulumgbe Deity explains, the process of ensuring the dead has been interred to completion is crucial.

Fig 2: The Ikpa and its beaters at the commencement of the man's funeral.



Usually the drum is kept in shrines, or in exceptional cases kept in a house of a highly respected priest. The drum is played by special people, usually selected by priests, and the play is done with the greatest care. The drum is further played at specific sites of a compound, the commonest site being the entrance to the compound. Near the entrance to the compound a spot is identified which will be used as the sacred place for the ceremony. This choice of site is believed to be where the man exited from existence and so the drum serves to heal the exit point so that more deaths in the homestead are averted. The drum is to be played on the eke day that *odo* comes from land of the spirits, and also on the night of eke day that he returns to the land of the spirits. Similarly, the drum is played after the burial of a man and at the commencement of a man's funeral. In this funeral the drum is used as a means of transportation of the participants onto a sacred realm where communing with the gods, spirits and the departed is amicable. The initial beating on *eke* implies "entering" of the second level of reality while the last beating signals a "return" to the ordinary level of reality.

The other musical instruments are *ogene* (small metal gong), *udu* (pot drum), *ichaka* (guard jingle), and *aro* (conical iron gong). Cannons- (*mkepor n'ala*) – made from a mixture of charcoal. They are also applicable for a man's and a woman's ritual. There is also the explosion of the cannon powder. This homemade device is set to explode in special stage of the event such as to announce the commencement of the funeral, the arrival of the various women groups and important persons, and to mark transition of one dramatic movement to another. These percussive instruments are used to set the rhythm and pace of the ritual.

Fig 3: The setting of cannon shot. Notice the explosive powder



Fig 4: A man setting cannon shot to announce the entry of a women's group.



Wrapper material has become a central item in funeral ritual because the key figures in a funeral ritual are women. These materials are to be distributed among the women of the homestead, the *umuada*. The materials for new wrappers symbolize a new beginning for both the departed and the survivors; a strategy of seeking to start life afresh after the fall of the departed. There are special attires for the participants of the ritual. The women groups from various villages enter the funeral dressed in various uniforms of their choice. There is no particular colour choice, and so the choice of uniform is meant to outshine a group from the others. This resembles what Francis Harding notes in regard to what he calls “symbolic matrix”; the situation where the participants are not aware that they are in costume yet an observer would do (210). The first born daughter of the deceased (*mwada*) puts on a necklace of large red beads (*Chikida*) worn around the neck and sometimes the waist. She is also donned with special uniform, usually, a wrapper dyed with crimson (*ube*). The crimson seems to symbolize either close blood ties with the deceased, or the gravity of having lost a father.

A special category of props in the ritual is food. Food and drinks form a special part of the ritual and feeding is the crucial necessity and activity of the ritual. Activities are carried out in such a way that food and drinks form major transition moments both for symbolic and realistic purposes.

On one hand food being symbol of livelihood is served to console the mourners, while on the other hand it is served to be eaten by the people on behalf of the ancestors. The more the food and the more the relish imply that the ancestors have duly accepted the departed, which is the pleasure of the living. In this funeral ritual, food is not just meant to satisfy hunger but is symbolically designed to play fundamental effects in line with the purpose of the ritual. Usually, the various edibles are prepared and consumed “on behalf” of the departed and the ancestors. This explains why the foods are prepared in plenty and in specific style, and are to be consumed in plenty and also in specific pattern for example there is food strictly meant for the *umuada* while others are meant for the other participants. The kola nut has great significance in a funeral ritual just like in other major events in Umulumgbe. A kola nut is held as sacred, and the ceremonial breaking and eating of the nut is a communion with the gods and ancestors (Gladys I. Udechukwu, 1). During a funeral rite, the gods and the ancestors are considered to be crucially in need of supplication and appeasement. The kola nut is thus broken and eaten at several junctures of the ritual such as arrival, departures, and transitions from one activity to the other. The symbolisms of the Kola nut are numerous and basically it depends on the contexts of the various occasions. The major one, as explained by Udechukwu is that the nut’s non-poisonous quality and medicinal value ascribe the nut with a “life affirming” property (25). This explains why the Igbo proverb “He who brings kola nut brings life” is paramount. As used in the funeral ritual, this aspect plays the Aristotelian role of “purging” the desires to ensure continuity of life even after death. As participants troop in with kola nuts, and the ensuing exchange and chewing, they satisfy themselves that they are putting a fundamental effort of ensuring life is sustained even beyond the grave. The other symbolism is that the nut has more than one lobe; they range from being two-lobed to even eight-lobed. This plurality of lobes signifies unity (26). This unity is appropriated in the funeral ritual to two purposes. One is fulfill the cosmological communion between the living and the dead with the gods. The other is to set the people to participate in the process in unity. So as the participants chew the nuts, they remind themselves of the communion with the spiritual world as well as unity among themselves.

Another very important food prop to a funeral ritual is the yam. Yam is one of the staple foods among the Umulumgbe, and is thus symbolic of livelihood (Chris Manus Ukachukwu, 244). The major reason why the yam is held with high esteem is that mythology of the Igbo (The myth of Eze Nri) has it that the crop was given to man as a gift to end a critical famine that befell the first family of the Igbo. In the myth, Chukwu the supreme god had ceased to feed mankind with *azu* (fish) and there was a food crisis in the first family (of Eze Nri). Chukwu advised them to kill their firstborn son and daughter to avert the crisis. From the graves of the children sprouted *Yam* and there was no famine anymore (250). A yam is therefore symbolic to a God-given form of livelihood whose emergence was paid with a fundamental price. As the chief food, the yam is used to symbolise livelihood and wish for sustenance because as the participants present or partake in receiving or eating of the yam, they play the role of demonstrating their kindness at the same time asking the gods to ensure their livelihood. Also considering that the yam is a man’s crop, this is thus a sign of appreciation coming specifically from men. The yam is a man’s crop because it is the chief staple food, and man being the chief supplier of food to the family is closely associated with this crop. This seems to be in line with the view that among the Umulumgbe, the man’s role emerges in the funeral as the helper of the woman. These items are prepared in such a way that they symbolically represent key issues in the understanding of death as addressed in the ritual. They are set imaginatively to create special effects in the understanding of death as a profound occurrence in human life. Seen from this perspective the ritual is an experience of imagination and the manipulation of the scenes make the imagination meaningful to the participants.

2.4 Time and Space of the Ritual

The performance of a man’s ritual takes place at the home of the departed. It takes place for four market days (*Eke* night to *Nkwo* evening. In Umulumgbe, *Eke*, *Nkwo* and *Afor* days are regarded as man’s days. This is because there are very important days for ritual performance. The Umulumgbe People believe that a man’s funeral should coincide with the return of *Odo* masquerades. *Odo* masquerades as the representation of the ancestors return from their travels from the world of the living to his abode – the world of the dead only on *eke* day. *Odo* is masculine and

that is why male children in Umulumgbe are named “Odo”. On *nkwo* day, *Odo* goes to his first market where people can see him, and makes his first climbing to Umulumgbe mountain on *Afor* day.

Fig 5: A typical appearance of *Odo* in his mask



Eke day is thus regarded as masculine. This is another pointer that the dramatic elements of a ritual are closely knot with the community’s myths. The home is chosen because it is where the departed came from, and is thus believed to be present at the scene both as an active participant. A photo of the departed is hung spectacularly on a tree at the centre of the compound. The departed’s role includes setting right the mood for the performance of the ritual. Every participant carries on as if the departed is actually present with them and watching every activity being done. All the activities are thus performed with a lot of seriousness. Another role of the participation of the departed is to unite all the participants in the ritual. All the mourners, close or distant to the departed are united by the common figure of the event: the departed.

Fig 6: The picture of the deceased (Late Mr. Elias Odoh of Lett village in Umulumbe)



The ceremonial aspect of the ritual is a means of resolving conflicts. The first and the most significant conflict being resolved is the one between the living and the dead. The first strategy of resolving this is the stringent regard to the process of the performance. The participants are seen in strict observations to ensure all procedures are followed with all the necessary observations. The ritual of a man starts at the evening of Eke day, the day of resting. Eke is held as very special to every man's activity because it is associated with the *odo* that on this day the *odo* spirit returns to his resting place only on the eke day. As Augustine Okpa explains, the consequences of an improper funeral can be far reaching considering the power *odo* society has in the lives of the people because a man may reincarnate as *Odo*, and so the coincidence of a man's funeral and *odo*'s day should be held crucially. He further illustrates the seriousness with which the funeral must be handled by showing how sacred items (the *ikpa* and the branches of *ababa* tree) are employed. To him the drum and the branches symbolise peace for both the deceased and the survivors.

During the return of *Odo* to the land of the living, the women stay indoors, and men do every outdoor activity including fetching food from farms or the market. The passing away of the man is equaled to the passage of this spirit. At this time the widow is made to stay indoors and no one is allowed to see her except the women who are specially assigned to guard her even when she is going out to relieve herself. This guarding is believed to protect her from evil spirits.

The action of the ritual is designed in a way that the ritual's time and space aspects are symbolic to the objective of the performance of the ritual, which is to settle the deceased and the living following the death. Only men participate on the first day, and much of the activity is presence at the home of the deceased. The sacred drum is also played along eating and drinking. The few women in the homestead, usually the *umuada*, prepare the food for the men and attend to the widow, and to watch the men play and dance to the sacred drum. The first person and the only person who qualifies to dance to the drum beat is a man who must be younger than the departed. On the second day (*Orie* day) women enter the scene. They arrive earlier than their men. The men trail them merely for protection and escort. The women's first action is to prepare food. The special food they prepare is *okpa* – this special food is made from mashed peas which is held so special that it is taken only by the *Umuada*. The women also bring the palm wine, which is held with esteem and is also preserved for the *umuada*. The other women and men are fed with rice and ordinary stew, soft drinks and beer. Food is prepared and served in excess for prestige. As women go about preparing and sorting food and drinks, the men sit around the portrait of the deceased usually to “keep him company”. Meanwhile, at the sacred site, the special drum is continuously played. The players drum, dance and yell in carnival mood usually as if possessed. Some of the young men dispatch in periodically to the forest to fetch branches from a special tree called *ababa* to be carried around and heaped before the drummers at the sacred site.

Fig 7: *Ahaba* tree branch**Fig 8: A participant in a frantic spirit bringing tree branch to the funeral from the bush**

As groups of women and special persons arrive cannon shots are made to announce their arrival. The cannons are shot at the inlet paths not far from the compound. There is much activity when a canon is shot. The women who are already in the compound start their song and dance, and if they were already singing, they raise their voices and dance as if to outdo the new guests yet the new guests take the gesture as welcoming. At midday, the climax of ceremony is reached and a formal meeting is held usually with speeches from special family members and special guests. The meeting begins with a prayer. The prayer is mainly for the soul of the departed to be accepted by God and the ancestors. The speeches are mainly selective praises of the deceased, and at no time would one make disparaging remarks about the deceased. After the meeting is concluded, the action goes to an informal session of mingling with dance and song. A carnival mood is created. At this time there is no restraint for anyone to mingle with the others except near the sacred site. Women dance around the compound followed by men who are enticed by their songs showering money on them. The lead dancer for each women group is usually the daughter of the family, seemingly, to ensure that her women group outshines those of the other *umuada*.

There is no formal order for the performances by the various groups; instead they perform as if to outdo each other though the effect is harmonious mainly because the songs and the dances are similar. Percussive musical instruments accompany the performances- drums, *udu* (pot drum), *ibaka* (guard jingle), and conical iron gong (*aro*). The instruments seem to go well with the songs and dances because the songs and dances require instruments which yield faster beats for the vigorous gyration. There may be some men, usually the friends of the departed, who may also get into the frenzy of singing and dancing alongside the women groups. For each dance there are no rehearsals rather the lyrics of the soloists are created spontaneously seemingly because the songs are communal rather than individual, and that most of the songs are antiphonal, thus, allowing easy moments for the members to learn the funeral songs (Appendix 3). One such song is *Asa idi m mma* (You are good to me):

Asa m ob idi m mma na m na gi ga ebi
Asa m ob idi m mma na m na gi ga ebi

My pretty lady you are good to me and you will live
 My pretty lady you are good to me and you will live

The singer is expressing admiration for the deceased. The physical prettiness is compounded with the goodness of the heart to describe the deceased. To the singer the two combines equals to life as she sings /you will live/. Such expressions are often created by the soloist to suit a specific occasion. The participants will follow by echoing the sentiments of the soloists. In the man's funeral, the words are changed to describe a man and his prowess. The soloist is thus a director of words and actions during major stages of the ritual. The fourth and last day (*Nkwo* day) is another repetition of the activities of the first day for a man's funeral. The sacred drum continues to be played at the sacred spot.

One of the drum beaters bears the name "Who-owns-death?" seemingly to imply that death affects everybody. More fetching of the branches is carried out. At this time men assert their presence through antics and scary acts as if possessed: they menacingly run around wielding machetes and threatening to cut trees. Others climb trees and threaten to release themselves to fall, or throw in big logs of wood, so that women and relations plead with them to abandon the act. This is only done at a man's funeral. The climax of the actions is seen at the moment when the house of the departed is threatened to be pulled down by men from the departed maternal home. These men from the side of the mother of the departed ("the uncles") seek menacingly to demolish the house by setting ladders to climb on to the roof, and wielding machetes. Everybody gathers around them to beg and plead with them to spare the house. They offer money and fowls but the men act stubborn. Eventually a makeshift structure of a house (which had been earlier crafted) is brought and offered to the men in exchange of the real house. To the relief of everyone the men set on the offered structure with fury, cutting down every piece of the structure.

Fig 9: Men from the mother's side of the deceased setting to "destroy" the house of the deceased. Notice another man appeasing the lead destroyer with a fowl.



Fig 10: A makeshift house set to be demolished "on behalf" of the main house.



2.5 Conclusion

In this study, I have illustrated how the Umulungbe funeral ritual can be analysed as drama in general and social drama in particular. I have used the theory of drama as postulated by Aristotle, and I have shown how the features suitably qualify as parameters with which rituals can be examined as creative texts. Subsequently, the ritual can be seen as imagined dramatic activity with most of its major aspects being set in character. The setting, attire, dialogue, thoughts and action of the ritual point towards drama. As social drama particularly, I have situated the ritual in the tenets of Turner in his analysis of the social drama category and the ritual of this study suitable yielded many insights to the nature and functionality of the ritual.

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