Mangrove Forest Folklore and the Drama of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo

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Introduction
John(son) Pepper Clark-Bekederemo was born on the 6th of April, 1935 to Chief Clark Fuludu Bekederemo at Kiagbodo in the Burutu Local Government Area of present Delta State. He had his primary and secondary education in schools in the Delta before proceeding to the University College Ibadan for his tertiary education. At the university he honed his art and craft essentially by his editorship of two journals, Beacon and Horn. This was to serve him in good stead as he worked as an information officer, was a features and editorial writer, editor of Black Orpheus, a Research fellow and a lecturer. In all these, his literary output did not flag as he churned out poems, and plays and researched, recorded, transcribed, translated and published The Ozidi Saga. J.P. Clark-Bekederemo can thus be seen as one writer with a very fecund brain and imagination who, while deriving a lot of inspiration from his native Izon environment and has reflected this in a large percentage of his works, also researches out to other culture to draw materials for his literary endeavours. In this wise, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo can be seen as a Nigerian, indeed a world writer.

J.P. Clark-Belederemo was born in the Niger Delta and grew up that region with its rich tapestry of interwoven customs and lore. In terms of physical structure, the Niger Delta is full of creeks, rivers and estuaries that divide the thick mangrove forest. The region is a complex swamp within which a great variety of biodiversity can be found. Due to the peculiar environment, it is very challenging for people to live there. But the Izon people have developed a culture that enables them to master the environment.

The domestication of the environment came as a result of the creation of mores and lores, indeed the creation of culture. Culture, as we know, is the total way of life of a people in an attempt to grapple with the challenges of leaving in the environment where they are. A number of elements make up culture. They include language, customs, beliefs, institutions, rituals, ceremonies, works of art, tools, techniques of doing things. These elements can be grouped into material and non-material aspects. It is with the interplay of these aspects, using the various components of culture, that man is able to dominate his environment and subdue it to his advantage.

Beliefs generate customs, institutions and other aspects of culture. Religion, of course, is a major plank on which beliefs are expressed. At the pinnacle of the Izon religious structure is, the supreme Deity and Creator of all. She is female and goes by several names: Tamara, Tamarau, Woyeungi, Woyin, Woyingi, Oyin, etc. Under the supreme deity are several other gods and ancestors: Owuama (water Spirits), oru, Oruama (local gods), Duwoiyou (ancestors). These all have their places and functions in the life of the Izon man. The fact that the Supreme Being is female, associated with reproduction and the nurturing of life, has a great significance in Izon folklore. The Izon
myth of creation is a case in point. This myth was recorded by Gabriel Okara and Obotunde Ijimere and they produced a play out of it entitled Woyengi. Just as in woyengi, we can see myths, tales and other aspect of folklore in the plays of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo.

Extensive work has been done on the geo-cultural environment of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo’s plays. There is A Cultural Background to the Plays of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo (1994) by Egbe Ifie which examines the plays from a cultural perspective. Ifie evaluates a number of the strands that make up culture in relation to events that happen in the plays. There is also the journal, Review of English and Literary Studies (1986) that issued a special number entitled J.P. Clark-Bekederemo’s festschrift. The American, Robert Wren, has done a book, J.P. Clark (1984). In these works, the scholars have attempted to navigate the labyrinth of imagery and folklore which give the plays their Izon flavour. The importance of such studies is borne out by the words of Oladele Taiwo that: “It is most important that readers should appreciate West African beliefs and attitudes in order to understand the literature”. (29)

Religious beliefs and attitudes occupy a central place in the folklore of a people and Clark-Bekederemo has explored these in creative ways. Egbe Ifie observes that “Clark-Bekederemo is more concerned with the narration of the folklore of his Delta peoples... many aspects of the culture and arts of the Ijo... run through all his plays”. (91)

Ifie identifies the cultural indicators by which this is achieved to include “... references, comments, sometimes satirical or laconic in nature, and narratives of the customs such as marriage, occupations, religious beliefs, proverbs, idioms, pithy sayings and attitudes and habits of his people”. (91) These indicators convey in our minds a picture of the geo-cultural environment of the plays. Before going to look at some of the plays, it is helpful to consider the importance of folklore.

Folklore has to do with the general lore of a people expressing their beliefs, attitudes, the expression of these in narrative performances employing proverbs, idioms and other verbal arts. Bernth Lindfors sees folklore as including “popular beliefs, stereotypes... folktales, proverbs and other forms of patterned oral art” (3). Jan Brunvand divides the modes in which folklore is expressed into three, namely: verbal, partly verbal, and non-verbal (2-3). No matter the mode of expression, however, certain conditions promote the rise and growth of folklore. Sam Hinton thinks that: “The most active folklore has come from communities having a certain amount of isolation-geographic, social, linguistic, or religious-coupled with a social structure allowing free social intercourse within the bounds of isolation”. (68)

Hinton adds that such societies usually had periods of stability having slow changes in different aspects of their socio-economic life (68). These conditions generate folklore traditions that usually have certain characteristics: (1) traditional, (2) expressed orally, (3) origin is anonymous, (4) different versions of it may exist, and (5) usually formalized.
In discussing the plays, we shall look at them from the point of view of language, tales and religion. The plays to be treated are *Ozidi* and *The Bikorooa Plays*, (Containing *The Boat, The Return Home*, and *Full Circle*).

### a. Terrain

The riverine terrain of *Ozidi* falls properly within the Niger Delta region inhabited by the Izons. The play’s opening itself is instructive for it shows the relationship between the people of Orua and their gods in the rivers. Throughout the play, we find comments that suggest or refer to a riverine community:

> Agbogidi: I fear this fall will echo down rivers like thunderbolt underground. (24)

While speaking of Ozidi the elder’s fame to boy, Oreame says:

> “Of course your father is a man famous all through the rivers”. (35)

And further in the scene, she says:

> Oh, let’s see, several days
> Hard paddling from here, I should think... (35)

In the final scene of the play, we see the Small Pox King arriving at the beach of Orua.

In *The Boat*, the water-logged terrain is indicated through references to boats, the main means of transportation in the numerous creeks and waterways. There are also references to houses built on stilts, fishing and such things as launching of a boat. *The Return Home*, set in the same community as *The Boat*, has similar references to water and related issues. These images are seen in the *Full Circle*.

### b. Language

The language of *Ozidi* is full of metaphors and phrases that represent the Izon geo-cultural environment. While on a visit to Tebesonoma’s sister on a mission to kill her and her child, Oreame says:

> It is not that I wish to spoil your stomach; The bitter Ijaw truth is that we have not come to be entertained. So leave the gourd where it is, and cut no plantain for the pot. (103)

This is typically an Izon rhetoric. Note the reference to the palm wine and plantain which are favoured items in Izon. The play contains metaphors and proverbs that add to its cultural richness. For example, Oreame asks Ogidii thus:

> Are you a dog that you waggle tail at every fond whistle? (103)
This tries to illustrate a typical Izon community where the dog is almost a communal property. It roams the community, plays with everyone and everyone plays with it, whistles at it, and also feeds it with all manner of food. The moral here is that Ozidi should not behave like the dog that is easily swayed by a fond whistle, which may turn out to be deceptive or destructive, if the one whistling has evil intents.

In *The Boat*, there are similar instances of the idiomatic use of language. For example, Burubo, while chiding Sanfio, asks: “Did you have to sail that close”. (19) In response to Sanfio’s denigration of second sons which apparently alludes to Biowa’s position with his elder brother, Badide. In the same play, Angala blesses a bottle of drink and gives orders for it to be served thus: “Here I touch the good bottle, and now you must shove out the boat” (7) and so the play goes on and on with sayings that paint a picture of the terrain from which it springs.

In *The Return Home*, we find language use that reflects the Izon environment. At the beginning of Act Two, Scene Four, the circuitous manner of speaking, accusations, and counter-accusations between Tonwe and Apele convey this linguistic creativity.

In *Full Circle*, Kari accuses his mother of riveting his canoe of life such that he finds himself circling in one place. In Act One, Scene Three, a neighbour is asked why he should break in on a meeting like unripe plantain dripping acid. Both metaphors capture adequately the location of the play.

The phenomenon of a canoe fixed and circling in one place can be quite overwhelming. This comes about principally when a canoe sails into a whirlpool, and the consequences can be quite devastating as J.P. Clark illustrates with the *Osikoboro* whirlpool in another play of his, *The Raft*. If a canoe of life finds itself in such a situation, the outcome can best be imagined.

Plantain is a staple in Izon culture. However, the process of harvesting it has its own drawbacks. It usually drips acid which can be injurious to the skin, clothing, furniture and other household items. Unripe plantain that is dripping acid is thus not an item that is readily received, and this neighbour is seen in that light within the present circumstance.

c. Tales

Allusions are drawn from the indigenous narrative lore of the Izon nation to enrich the plays. In *Ozidi*, we find such instances as when Oguaran dismisses Ewiri’s reference to Ozidi the younger’s appearance at Orua as the harvest from a champion yam planted “several seasons gone by” thus: “Away with your riddles, man! We are not children gathered under a mango tree”. (64)

Allusion is also made to the wily tortoise as we see when Ofe is said to be more resourceful than the tortoise and he turns out to be the chief architect of Ozidi’s fall. At the fight between Ofe and Ozidi, the former resorts to the tricks of the tortoise by taunting Ozidi that he is pulling at roots instead of his legs when he runs under a silk cotton tree. *The Boat* is also rich in this respect. There is reference to the ray fish that helps sailors wrecked at sea by carrying them on its back to the shore. This image is taken from a folk tale. There is also allusion to the mythic history of the Mein clan of Izon which is said to have begun at Ogobiri in present-day Bayelsa State of Nigeria.
In *The Return Home*, we also find references to tortoise the trickster that is ever present in Izon folklore.

### d. Religion

Izon religious sensibilities are represented in the plays under consideration. In *Ozidi*, there are three levels of Izon religious belief brought to light. These are *Tamara*, *Oruama* and the ancestors. *Tamara*, the almighty’s power of creation, is invoked when Oreame tells her daughter, Orea, after Ozidi the senior gets killed thus:

> Do not wail more; do not seek to take your life, or don’t you know you are heavy with another life, yes, a son who Oyin Almighty Herself is sending forth to put to right this terrible wrong done to his father?

Oreame prays to Tamara:

> Ay, Oyin Tamara, you who are mother of all mankind, moulder of earth, sky and sea

The gods (*Oruama*) also have their share of recognition. The classic scene is the opening sequence where the story-teller informs the audience of a hitch, that without sacrifice to the gods, the show cannot go on:

> Trouble is that, before we can perform for your pleasure and benefit tonight, we must first have a sacrifice to placate our hosts from the sea. Oh, yes, there are special spectators streaming all around you right now, even though you may not see or touch them. (1)

The story-teller goes on to pray for good wives, good children and good money from the people of the sea.

> People of the sea, people of the sea, two times, three times I call upon you.... Here’s biscuit, here’s sugar, here’s wine, all that is sweet to you. And now that you have taken of our food and of our drinks, please give us good wives, give us good children, and give us good money, too. (3-4)

The veneration of the ancestors is another instance of religious thought. As Ofe says: “we require a king to pour our fathers’ libation to wash ourselves clean”.

In another scene, Temugedege swears by the dead that Orea is still their wife since she did not make repayment to either him or any other person. One unique aspect of this religious outlook in the play is that all three levels of deities can be prayed to at the same time. We observe this when Orea prays for the protection of her husband, Ozidi:
You will save him for me, won’t you Tamara? And you city ancestors and gods, it is for your glory he’s gone now as in the past.

In *The Boat*, the religious world view of the Izon geo-cultural environment is at play. There are prayers to the supreme God, Tamara. Peletua says: “Blessings of Tamara! How could my tongue slip like that?” Other gods and the ancestors also feature in the play. Peletua, at the reception of Biowa, prays thus:

> Let the generous lady of the water fill his store with herbounties, good money, good wives, good children, and the long, long life to enjoy them.

In another scene, we see Bradide denying Umuto’s allegation that he does not want progress for his brother, Biowa: “That’s a lie, and may the dead and gods judge you for it” *Ngbile*, the grand ancestor of the clan and his god of justice, *Odele*, are invoked to be present at the trial of Biowa and all witnesses are reminded that they are before their forebears (Ngbile and Odele). This is a kind of oath, demanding the truth and nothing but the truth.

*The Return Home* explores several matters of religious thinking. Act Two dramatizes the religious institution of calling back home persons who died dishonourably and are thus not sitting with other ancestors of the land. The three levels of Izon religious belief, namely, Almighty *Tamara*, gods (*Oruama*), and ancestors are well represented. Indeed, there is a scene where we hear a dialogue between the living, the dead, and the gods.

*The Full Circle* contains ideas of religious thought. The two predominant religious levels portrayed are those of the Almighty *Tamara* and the gods (*Oruama*). The belief in destiny and re-incarnation is highlighted as it is said of Kari that he should choose a better lot from his maker next time and come back to the family to be reborn.

**Conclusion**

The fourplays examined offer good illustration for the ways Izon geo-cultural environment and its folklore of the mangrove forest influence world view, beliefs and attitudes. The setting of the plays within the Izon geo-cultural environment has a significant influence on the themes, imagery and language.

In the view of Oladeletaiwo, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo’s

… declared aim is to portray life in the rivers as he knows and has observed it. Each of his plays deals with an aspect of life important to his people. Their social practices and beliefs, their shortcomings and difficulties are dramatized on stage. (7)


