

Bards and Novelisation of Societal Events: The Chukwuemeka Ike Example

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Abstract

Every society has some of her members endowed with the gift of storytelling. The individuals with such gifts are bards. As bards, they have sensitive memories for recalling experiences of the society. They relay events of the society to other members with oral narrative skills for tripartite purposes. In retelling the collected events, the bards reconstruct them into sagas. However, with the wave of western education and its attendant effects, bards have ceased to limit their activities of relaying events in oral sagas only. This is because with pen on paper the modern bards tell tales, unlike before when they did orally. Chukwuemeka Ike is an example of a modern bard who uses paper and pen. Consequent upon this, this essay looks at how he fits into the modern coterie of bard through a careful consideration of how he collects and novelizes events, using one of his novels, *The Bottled Leopard*, as an example.

Introduction

Bards are people endowed with the gift of devastating wit and formidable knowledge of the society and its cultural institutions. They compose and perform oral narratives before members of the society, sometimes, extemporaneously on significant events (Nwabueze 22). In such composed oral sagas, they enliven important incidents because they are individuals of strong voices and hearts; knowledgeable in the philosophy, worldview, and mode of life of their societies and have them on their fingertips. The legendary exploits of those who lived in the past and those of the immediate environment are artistically weaved into tales through engineering on words. Thus, as men and women steep in the history of the people, the bards see themselves as those entrusted with the responsibilities of collecting and committing to memory every vital incident that took place in the society. This duty makes them meticulous when reconstructing historical issues for clarification of existing problems.

Every human society has these individuals in their midst with differences in nomenclature. Stressing on the variant naming patterns of bards the world over, Hale says “societies that count these groups of individuals among their various professions, however, have their own words to describe them” (251). Hale is right, this is because in Mandinka, Bambara and Malinka, among the Mande people, such persons are *jeli*. In the *Moor*, they take the name *iggio* and in Wolof, they are *guelwel* or *gewel*. In Hausa, they have the name *Marok'i* and *gesere* or *jaare* in Soninke. In Songhary, they are called *Jesere* and *nde aka* or *nde ebu* in Edda-Igbo of south eastern Nigeria, (Hale 260; Ukpai 1).

In the ancient world, among the Greeks, they are *rhapsodes*, *skalds*, *saga-men*, *poets*, *royal counsellors*, *seers*, *singers* or *minstrels*. In France, they are *jongleur*. The Germans call them *gaukler* or *minnesingers*. The *troubadour* is their name in Southern France, Northern Spain and Northern Italy. In Northern and Central France, they are *trouv'ers* (Baker 15). In the words of Nwabueze, bards are sometimes referred to as “storytellers, anecdotists, raconteur, etc” (22). One has no option than to agree with these creams of scholars because every human society has its distinct dialect and or language by which it names all things. Therefore, in each of the speech communities mentioned, there are different identifiable names for them but with similar usefulness all through.

Bards' Usefulness in the Society

Bards have lots of usefulness and functions, which they carry out in all societies they exist. These allow them stand for scores of things at the same time: historians, storytellers, singers, poets, musicians, traditional leaders, social advisers, satirists, or political commentators. They are seen as historians because they are custodians and repositories of the people's history; storytellers because of their expertise in weaving personal experiences and those of others into stories; singers, poets and musicians because they always collect major societal events and midwife to others through sagas for their listening pleasure. They are traditional leaders because they lead people in the right direction on issues of the past; social advisers because of their craft in giving pieces of advice to people in stories. They are satirists because they are in the habit of satirising social issues and behaviours of people that are not in accordance with civic sense of decorum; and they are political commentators because they subtly comment on the decisions of the ruling class and other political happenings of their societies. They achieve all these with stories as instructional materials. This is because every incident is artistically weaved into stories aimed at achieving the tripartite functions of literature as well as checkmates the behavioural excesses of men in the society.

Subject Matter and Inspiration

Bards draw their subjects from the occurrences of their immediate and remote environs. This is to say that their subjects of discourse do not embody matters of far-fetched actions, rather those on their environments. The events may not have happened to them directly, or to any known acquaintance of theirs or to people known to them but now far away. However, due to their perceptive minds, their subjects are all embracing. They draw from events that took place in the life of any person or group in the past, which in the contemporary times only exist in the historical tales of the people. In fact, their interests encompass matters of public and general interest, the level of triviality of the incidents, as anyone may think of it, notwithstanding.

Furthermore, the subjects might range from nature through devotional lyrics down to encomiums of praise or protest directed at any member of the society. It could be on retrospective communal praises directed at the culture's native history in chronicles of gods, heroes and other mythic creatures. In some societies, like the Edda-Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria, bardic compositions are for people, mostly when dead. This is because the bard's ability to describe a person's feats after his/her death thus elevating him/her to a hero's status, which was often the only consolation he/she had to achieve for enduring fame. Yet, even at the pre-historic times in Edda, the subjects of bardic compositions centred on anything: people's genealogy, family history; people's great deeds and failures. On a general note, bards compose their sagas on any subject to convey the message they have for other members of the society. With these ways of lives, bards are social diarists, social commentators, observers and repositories of the people's actions and deeds.

The question is; what is it that inspires bards across the globe? The answer to this question is not far from reachable. This is because, bards, as already known among scholars, are either born or made. In either ways, the sure thing is that their talents, which is latent is to be developed. It is in the process of the development that the idea of inspiration comes into play. To achieve this all-important phenomenon, every true bard goes on an apprenticeship under another bard for the acquisition of the needed inspiration in the business of bardism. This age-long practice still prevails in the modern times.

Bardic Apprenticeship: Ike's Example

Ike, the Anambra State born scholar and quintessential modern bard-writer went through series of trainings during which he received the required inspirations. It started from his family where he grew up under a strict and disciplinarian father who was a king and a civic leader (Wikipedia 1). The training continued at the primary schools in his native town, Ndikelionwu and Ife-Mbaise through his post-primary school in Umuahia, and University in Ibadan. His experiences at these citadels of learning prepared him for the duty of bardism.

As one of the first generation's seasoned academics, his training in Government College, Umuahia, more especially, awake the natural inner powers in him. Also ignited were his powerful memories and the ability to plumb the depths and roam the heights of consciousness in search of inspiration and creative flame. These were possible due to the well-equipped library of the College, which served as one of the major sources of the bard-writer's inspiration. Discussing the contribution of the college library towards nurturing the talent of some of the most relevant authors in African literary history which the development of Ike's talent as a bard-writer is not left out, Ochiagha notes that:

When asked what the most memorable feature of the college would be with regard to their development as authors, Achebe and his colleagues always point towards their school library. Filled with more books than the boys could ever have dreamt of, it was not just the place to be whenever any of them got particularly bored at school. There was a regulation that enforced its use. (3)

Momoh in *The Shining Ones: The School Days of Obinna Okoye*, which is the autobiographical account of his days at Umuahia, confirms the above assertion thus:

Prep was a strictly regulated hours of study, in the library, following immediately after the rest period. This was the hour for swotting up the books, or does one's written assignment. Or, if one was so inclined, to take down one of the hundreds of books, fiction and non-fiction, housed in the library... sometimes just sat and daydreamed, gazing in wonder at the impressive rows of books on the shelves; more books than I had ever seen assembled in one building. I dreamed that one day I could truly boast that I had read every one of them. I liked sometimes to idle the time away thumbing through the numerous colourful magazines, mostly British, which were displayed on the magazine racks. (81)

Achebe, possibly the school's most famous alumnus, also confirms the richness of the school's library and on his part states:

In my secondary school when I had the good fortune of the fine library I have already paid tribute to I did indeed read, on my own, a few 'African' novels by such writers as Rider Haggard and John Buchan. But I did not connect the Africa in these riveting adventure stories among savages even remotely with myself or my homeland. Perhaps I was too young. Perhaps I was yet to appropriate Africa from the remote, no man's land of the mind where my first English primer had placed it for me. (*Under Imperial Fire* 31-32)

Obviously, Ike's journey to the literary stardom at the College, which had a very good library stocked with literary classics, compelled him, alongside others, to read novels.

As a voracious reader, he internalized the forms of the books read and they developed in him a critical sense of judgement. This is evident in “The Bottled Leopard” he wrote thirty-five years after he left the school. However, the library was not functioning in isolation in wetting the voracious appetite for literature in the young Ike. The school’s magazines played a vital role in inspiring and training him in the skill of novelizing experiences.

The use of magazines first came into existence in the school in 1933. Robert Fisher, the founder and first Principal of the school, founded it. At the inception, it was *Eastern Star*, later changed to *The Umuahian*. The magazines assisted Ike to develop his bardic talents of recalling and putting to paper his experiences. Ike himself confirms this idea when he says:

I went to Government College Umuahia in January 1945, which provided an ideal environment for anyone with a flair for creative writing. The medium for publishing what you wrote existed in ‘House magazine’ as well as the college magazine. Every House had a hand-written magazine published periodically; the College magazine was printed. I edited the magazine for my house and served on the editorial board of the college magazine. My first ever-printed story – *In Dreamland* – appeared in the college magazine No. 2 (1948-49). (Qtd in Oguzie 367)

The personal researches carried out in the libraries and or his writings in the school magazines did not only fashion Ike. Like every other bards, his apprenticeship in the hands of some dedicated masters of his in the college also had positive effect on his career as a bard. The first among them was Adrian P. L. Slater who it was said “would complain that he was ‘sick and tired’ of African stupidity and make derisive reference to the idea of ‘renascent Africa’ (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 27). The second was Charles Low, an Oxford-trained Australian poet and playwright who was reputed to know *Paradise Lost* virtually from memory. The third was Mr Saburi Biobaku, who had honours in English from Cambridge, taught him English language. These teachers most directly involved in nurturing and influencing Ike’s knowledge and love for the English Language and literature. He admires and clung on them as his idol and sources of inspiration. They piloted his mode of writing as a master bard-writer. Through them, he received the needed ideas on how to thrive on the bardic business, which fell within the disposition of remembering well and satisfying the demands of the audience.

The bookish peregrination based trainings alongside other personal contacts Ike had with his superiors gave him the privilege to be knowledgeable and steep in the history, traditional lore and custom of his College and life at large. Again, these afforded him the opportunity to become a qualified master storyteller. They equipped him with the right aptitude to look into the future and influence the world around them. Of course, it

is after acquiring the skills that his gift in the art of bardism developed and he became able to reveal his personal experiences, those of others and of the society in stories for us his audience to be abreast of his earlier day's experiences as ex-rayed in "The Bottled Leopard".

The presence of Christian religion, its introduced written culture, which is determinately forcing the vivacious African oral culture to its untimely grave, could not stop Ike from telling his African story. The occidental calligraphic style of educating, instructing and informing the society only succeeded in numbing him from the oral presentation of events but could not deter him from revealing and telling of his African background and belief of things. Therefore, he jettisoned the erstwhile oral means and took up the styles of using pen and paper to midwife issues of the society to members of same society and beyond. As a bard, he uses his acquired western education to do with pen and paper what he would have done with words of mouth. Instead of engineering on his words orally, he does so with pen and paper and achieved same aim as a person of good words. Therefore, as a modern bard and member of the society naturally concerned with the responsibilities of recording events that took place in the society, he collected and reconstructed into stories various events for public consumption. As an enigmatic entertainer, he uses his tales to communicate issues of the moment.

Ike and Novelizing of Incidents

Novelizing of personal and societal events is one of the utmost duties of a bard in the modern times. As a contemporary bard in writing, Ike fulfils this obligation as he novelizes events of his life and those of others for the enjoyment, instruction and education of the reading public. In novelizing the events in his younger days, he pays homage to his school and hometown in one of his literary works -- *The Bottled Leopard* (1985). In the novel, he fictionalizes some vital events of his teen life that took place in his native place, Ndikelionwu and in his alma mater, Government College, Ahia, villages in the southeastern Nigeria. He narrates his ordeals both at his home where he experienced strict discipline and in the school where he encountered harsher discipline and deliberate effort to discourage him from his African belief and thoughts, which are "characterized by all sorts of credulous beliefs, superstitions, rituals, exorcism and necromancy"(Nnadi 65). Because the procedures in the twenty-two chapter work happened in those two places, the setting oscillates between Ndikelionwu community and Government College, Ahia.

Within these two locales, Ike novelized his experiences for us readers. He does this via the presentation of life experiences of Ugochukwu Amobi the major character who enters Government College from his Ndikelionwu background. As a master bard in writing, he started the tale with Amobi in school dreaming of a leopard that jumps into Nma's father compound. Rather than express happiness as the leopard faces danger as

“a window sprang open, revealing a double-barrel shotgun, its nozzle pointed at the leopard’s heart” (1), Amobi screamed for help “Nnem, O! I’m dead, O!” (The Bottled, 2). Instead of receiving the help he called for, he receives threat and warning against the repeat of the just exhibited strange behaviour from a prefect thus:

‘It’s obvious that you haven’t returned to your senses yet,’ ... ‘Report at the Prefect’s Room immediately after breakfast tomorrow, before morning assembly, with a full explanation of your strange behaviour just now. And make sure you don’t interrupt my sleep again tonight!’(The Bottled 2)

The presentation of the nightmare connects us to other experiences of Amobi’s encounter with a leopard, albeit in Ndikelionwu. This is evident as Ike allows Amobi to put us through with this idea as he ponders in his mind that he had seen only one live leopard in his thirteen years, but that experience had left an indelible impression on him. It was in his hometown, Ndikelionwu, when he was about the age of his younger sister, Adaodi; Six plus. His parents were away all night at the wake-keeping ceremony of a late uncle. He and his elder sister, Obiageli, who had been instructed to look after him, had fallen asleep on a mat, in the front verandah of their mother’s hut where they ate their supper. He could not remember what made him open his eyes at the time he did, but straight in front of him, not too far away, glowed two tiny lights.

(3)

The next event narrated is the issue of “initiation” in the name of “cutting tails”. This event was prevalent in all secondary schools and had to do with a deliberate humiliation and putting in proper places of the new in-takes. On the awareness that the college students are individuals who came from all works of life, the ceremony was conducted by the second year students for all form one students of the college no matter the “fag’s” family background or level of intelligence at the primary school. Chuk, a mulatto, born and bred in the West the home of knowledge, was made to drink ‘solution A’ by the senior boys to tame his ego and tell all and sundry to obey every instruction at once. For the M.C. to reduce Chuk’s personality, sooner he climbed the podium and had not say a word the M. C. shouted at him, “don’t plant your mouth on the mike, whatever you call yourself ... We don’t want to be poisoned by CO₂ from your stinking mouth ... Say after me ... and say it loud and clear, okey?” (The Leopard 8).

One obvious fact is that while novelizing this event, Ike, as a master bard in writing, manipulates on words by carefully choosing his words to capture the scenario of the good old school days. Azuike confirms this when he says:

This occasion (the initiation ceremony) gives us the opportunity to re-live our schoolboy days when the penchant for the bombastic was a mark of erudition and source of hilarity to all. It is not surprising therefore that in the encounter between Chuk and the M. C. At the ceremony, stock phrases such as “assault-without-battery”, “august assembly”, “green fag”, “bushman”, “insubordination”, familiar in schoolboy interchange are freely used. At this point also, Chukwuemeka Ike demonstrated for us

in a most graphic manner, the seniority complex that exists in secondary schools founded on strict discipline and ritualistic observances. (50-51)

From the chosen diction and stock phrases one notices the subtle manner Ike unfolds the western view about Africa and her people. One notices how he exemplifies Ndikelionwu as an African society with characteristic African beliefs and traditions and Government College as epitome of the African reformation through strict adherence to rules and regulations (Nnadi 65). In the school, the boys learnt how to respect seniors, the brutal consequences of non-compliance of rules and regulations, and the consequences of sticking to the superstition of his people. As Ike puts it, Government College is “a school where you could earn a sentence of two hours detention, with hard labour, for speaking your own language/your mother tongue: Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, Yoruba ... Even to your brother, no matter where.”(11).

All these strict lifestyles in the school apart, Ike brings in the usual and preponderant youthful exuberance in college students, which, in Government College, Ahia, leads them into breaking some rules of the college. How Ugochukwu Amobi and his friend Chuk involved themselves in one of such acts of “making for the upper”, the code name for a foray into the college orchard, is fictionalised. Their major aim for embarking on the adventure was to break the existing record and prove to the older students that even ‘fags’ with tails tangling behind them could achieve such feat. In Ike’s own words, “their main objective on this first trip was to demonstrate that fags could ‘make for the uppers’ without being caught” (8). His friend Chuk lured Amobi into the riveting adventure. This is because he consciously started pricking. Ike puts it thus:

As they made for the senior staff tennis court, which separated them from the orchard, Amobi suddenly grew restless. What if they were caught? What would he tell his parents? That his throat had grown so long that he could no longer control it? That he had never eaten bananas or oranges in his life ... (18)

With this story of orchard expedition, Ike connects us to what happened in Ndikelionwu because it eventually earns them a two-week’s suspension. Tunji, Amobi’s school guardian advises both boys to spend the suspension together at Ndikelionwu with Amobi’s family. While at Ndikelionwu, Amobi experiences another nightmare in a night after he meets face to face with Nma, his dream girl, who had once written a letter to him when he was in school.

Amobi’s absence from home due to his leopard-associated ill health forces Mazi Eze, Amobi’s father to take Chuk to Mr Okonkwo at the primary school where he teaches. Chuk spent the remaining days of the suspension at the Primary school. However, the tufts of black and white hair found between Amobi’s teeth during the nightmare at home amazed Mazi Eze. This led both father and son to look for explanation and solution from Dibia Ofia who successfully ‘bottles’ Amobi’s leopard. Nevertheless, Chuk did not keep to his promise of keeping to himself what happened to his friend during their suspension. What this revelation did to the relationship between Amobi

and Tunji, the leopard's rumours in the school and the tensioned it caused Amobi were novelized.

Conclusion

Chukwuemeka Ike's experiences in the hands of his parents at home, in the hands of the senior students and teachers in the school formed the matrix of his contemporary life. With the stories, he seems to be advising that teachers and students alike should be careful with their conducts in school. However, this must be taken seriously because as Curran puts it, "bards (are) not only poets or story tellers but also prophets, imbued with supernatural inspiration to see the future as well as the past of their nation" (508).

There is no doubt that Ike talking from his experiences at home and in his College alma mater, because he himself had confirmed this when he says "On my visit to my old school, Government College, Umuahia, in 1994, a Vice-Principal told me that they saw *The Bottled Leopard* as a novel on the College. The boys, therefore, read it with special interest" (Qtd in Ochiagha 7). To be candid, Ike in *The Bottled Leopard* novelized the golden moments of his old school days. This is like other alumni of the school. Achebe, one of the most famous alumni is very happy about this as he bares his mind on the occasion of the launching of *The Shining Ones* by Momoh when he says:

He was full of praises for his dear friend for doing their school a befitting honour ... the lost of their Alma mata (sic) and nature of discipline in their time. The Government College that is celebrated in Momoh's book has virtually disappeared ... the school, like the country, has fallen on hard times. The book written by Ike now serves as a memory bank for posterity to draw from, (Qtd in Ochiagha 8). However, one would hope that others would be inspired to novelize their experiences like Ike and his coteries.

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