



## **Subjectivity in Servitude: The Servant and Indigenous Family Arrangement in Written Igbo Drama**

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### **Abstract**

Membership into the African family may be on the basis of natural (birth) or social (marriage, adoption, apprenticeship, etc) selection. The present paper examines the roles of eleven servants in eight plays written in Igbo language by six authors. The work considers the perception of the servant by other characters in these works of art, the way in which each of these servants perceives him/herself, and the roles of the servant in the development of the entire fictional enterprise. Finally, the theory of subjectivity: the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions that largely account for the relationship between the individual and the society, is used in the present work to explain the authors' presentations of the servants in these dramatic works of fiction.

### **Résumé**

L'on devient membre de la famille africaine sur la base d'une sélection naturelle (naissance) ou sociale (mariage, adoption, processus d'apprentissage). Cette communication analyse le rôle de onze domestiques, dans 8 pièces de théâtre écrites en Igbo, par six auteurs. Elle s'intéresse à la façon dont les autres personnages perçoivent les domestiques dans ces pièces de théâtre, ainsi que la perception que ces employés de maison ont d'eux-mêmes, et le rôle des domestiques dans l'univers traité dans le roman. Enfin, cet article traite de la subjectivité, c'est-à-dire des pensées conscientes et inconscientes qui déterminent la relation entre l'individu et la société. Cette forme de subjectivité est évoquée dans cette communication, pour mieux expliquer le portrait qui est fait de ces domestiques dans ces fictions.

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### Introduction

The family exists in all kinds of economic, social and religious situations. The nuclear family structure comprises a man, a woman and their children. The extended family, as is typical in Africa, comprise fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews, parents and grandparents, cousins, wives sharing one husband, wives married by several brothers and, indeed servants. This is but a limited view too, of the scope of the family, because in many Igbo communities, a whole village that has common ancestry is regarded as a family. Typically; members of a family are guided by a principle of sacred blood covenant: *umune* that prohibits the shedding of blood among them, and in the Ngwo-Igbo area, the principle of *oshie* guards against inter-marriage and the shedding of blood among about five, whole communities. On a smaller scale, many family members in Igboland, as well as other African communities are guided by the incest taboo: they can not have sexual intercourse with one another, nor can they intermarry.

Membership into a family is pre-selected for one through accidents of birth especially, and less through marriage and other social arrangements like business. Marital union, at least in modern times is not predetermined for a person in advance to an extent that she or he must live with an arrangement largely deemed inconvenient. Similarly, a business agreement sets a time period within which an apprentice may live with and work with his master (apprentices under such an arrangement are often male), and under such a situation we may not regard the apprentice as a *bona fide* member of the family. Such a temporary member of the family is regarded as one who is in a state of servitude to his owner.

A dictionary definition of servitude by *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (6th edition) does not perhaps capture all the intricate arrangements of states of servitude, for all such states, in the contemporary sense, are not necessarily '*the condition of being a slave or being forced to obey another person*'. However, this definition as well as two other definitions of a servant in this dictionary are important to our study. The dictionary's first definition of a servant is '*one who works in another person's house, and cooks, cleans, etc*' while another is '*a person or thing that is controlled by something*'. These three definitions will form our conceptual focus in our study, as we critically examine writers' positioning of the temporary family member of the type called *nwa odibo* (literally: little servant) in Igbo works of fiction of the dramatic mode. We hope through this study to make important statements about the ways in which servitude as practised in our contemporary society

creates certain forms of ambiguity about a person's perception of self and others. We shall attempt to address the following questions:

1. What are the roles of *nwa odibo* in written Igbo drama?
2. How do other characters in the dramatic work perceive the role of *nwa odibo*?
3. How does *nwa odibo* take his or her assigned position in the larger context of family roles?
4. To what extent does the role of *nwa odibo* help the development of the overall work of art?
5. Using the theory of subjectivity, to what extent can we explain the author's presentation of the self-image of *nwa odibo* as well as the image of him or her, seen from the perspectives of other characters in the work of art?

To seek answers to these questions, we have employed different literary and structural-linguistic tools from the works of six authors in eight dramatic works written in Igbo namely: Inno Nwadike's (1989) *Onye Kpaa Nku Ahuhu* (1992; 2000), *Omume onye na-edu ya* (1990), and *Nwata Bulie Nna Ya Elu*; J. C. Maduekwe's (1979, 1993) *Otu Mkpisi aka*; Goddy Onyekaonwu's (1982; 1991) *Oku Uzu Daa Ibube*; Walter Eneore's (1982) *Oji Isi Kote Ebu*; and G. I. Nwaozuzu's (1998) *Ajo Obi* and Nkechi Okediadi's (2002) *Ihe Onye Metere*.

We list the writers' names for *nwa odibo* in each of their works as follows:

J. C. Maduekwe (1979, 1993): Echi

Walter Eneore (1982): Udumgbo, Ibe and Okechi

Goddy Onyekaonwu (1982): Aligwoekwe

Inno Nwadike (1989): Arisa

Inno Nwadike (1990): Umelo

Inno Nwadike (1992; 2000): Ibekwe

G. I. Nwaozuzu (1998): Oti and Orie

Nkechi Okediadi (2002): Nwaadi

### **The roles of servants**

With the exception of Orie in the works of Nwaozuzu (1998) that serves her 'owners' alongside a male servant, all the servants in the eight books are males. Servants live in the houses of their 'guardians', hereby called their 'owners', with such owners occupying positions, of course, much higher in authority than the servants. The roles of the servants may be divided along the simple, fairly complex, complex, and criminal axis. The simple tasks of servants include running brief errands such as summoning someone to their owners' presence, as well as receiving visitors on behalf of their owners.

Such is the role of Okediadi's (2002) Nwaadi in the house of Okezie and Chinyere as he is sent to call the attention of Ahaotu to his master's presence. Similarly, Nwadike's (2000) Ibekwe receives visitors for his owner, Iloka as well as informs the town crier about his master's wish to give an open invitation to all members of the community to his house for a feast. In the same vein, Onyekaonwu's (1991) Aligwoekwe is sent by his owner and the paramount ruler of the community- Eze Omaliko to summon the village high priest to his presence. In all these instances, their tasks are simple and their presence in the scene brief. At other times, the functions of servants are fairly complex, being a bit more laborious and would usually include also the tasks described as simple above. In these instances, some servants do not only run errands; they also take care of the entire household when the family head is away. Udumgbo is asked by his master and paramount ruler of the community to take charge of the affairs of the home as the ruler goes away on a short trip (Eneore 1982:19). Similarly, Arisa takes charge of home in the absence of his owners: Nnenna and Ikechukwu (Nwadike 1989); while the task of admitting a stranger into the house who has impersonated his master, is mistakenly done by Oti, with terrible consequences (Nwaozuzu 1998). Echi performs the duties of cleaning and scrubbing, going on errands outside the home, taking charge of the house when every member of the family of Ukoha and Mgbokwo is away as well as cooking most of the family meals (Maduekwe 1979:32, 38, 39, 52). Indeed the role of Echi best falls into our third classification of the task of the servant, which comprises a series of complex functions. This brings to the fore the positions of other family members including the heads of the house as well as others especially those within the same age bracket as the servant. The elderly couple: Ukoha and Mgbokwo have one son, Chikwe, and two daughters, Nwamaka and Obiageri. While Nwamaka is often away from home in her selfless struggle to provide for the sustenance of the entire family, the other two are irresponsible and give their parents several sleepless nights. No members of the family assist the servant, Echi, in the general household chores, except Mgbokwo. Mgbokwo's husband, Ukoha, is only the statutory head of his household, since he leaves the responsibilities of family sustenance in the hands of his oldest daughter, Amaka. He also appears incapable of having any worthy, positive impact on his only son, Chikwe, who is both wayward, and a drunk. Echi, by virtue of his free interactions with family members, may be described as more privileged than other servants in other Igbo works, whose positions demand not only obedience and deference but also distance, as hallmarks of their relationships with their owners. But as much as Echi interacts quite freely with all, the onerous duties of housekeeping brings to the fore the contradictions inherent in his position as a marginal, temporary member of the household.

By the demands of an owner, a servant may perform criminal acts including intimidation, kidnap and murder. In such instances, servants act under the dictatorial power of their master who uses them for jobs seen as too dirty for such a master. These are the positions assumed by Eneore's (1982) servants: Udumgbo, Ibe and Okechi, who are used by their master to perform various forms of terrorist acts including holding as ransom, a messenger, Oluona, sent to the paramount ruler by another ruler from a neighbouring community; murdering a famous diviner, Nwaelemele, a few hours after he has prepared an efficacious charm that would ensure the protection of the ruler from external foes; and seizing one of the two wives of their master, whom they lock up in a dungeon, pending her execution day as the powerful ruler decides (Eneore 1982:35-36; 48, 55-56; 65). In all instances, the servants are loyal, trustworthy and obedient.

With the exception of a few, servants are presented as people with a limited intelligence, seen often from their speech and their mode of interaction with other members of the family as well as other characters in the dramatic works. Thus, people that interact with such servants find them stupid, shallow-minded, and frivolous. Indeed some servants as represented in these works of fiction can be said to have a very myopic view of the world around them, as some appear destined to remain in servitude all their lives. Such may be said of Maduekwe's (1993) Echi, Nwadike's (1989) Arisa and Nwaozuzu's (1998) Orie and Oti to mention a few.

The four servants in the above works are people with less than average intelligence, frivolous, and too meddling for others to tolerate. These features make them take most speeches literally as well as render them comic characters. For instance, Echi rushes into his owner's presence to answer her when he mistakenly thinks she has called him. He cries when his owner comments that she is retiring to bed without dinner because she is too sleepy to wait. Echi weeps because he thinks his owner will die of hunger, in her sleep. In another scene, Echi, the fool rushes to his owner's presence with a bowl of water and soap when his owner uses the metaphor of dirt, to lament over her daughter's immoral acts that have brought shame to the family. Answering the anonymous call seems a regular trait of servitude, as Orie in the works of Nwaozuzu (1998) also tries to answer her owner's call, not knowing that Obiageli, her owner has pronounced the word *oria* (illness) in her speech, not *Orie*. Orie's servile counterpart Oti stammers, he speaks incoherently, and the theme of food preoccupies most of his speech. On his own, the choice of Nwadike's (1989) Arisa to use wrong English tenses as well as inappropriate gender-markers in his addresses is regarded by other characters as an indication of his stupidity: Arisa not only proffers answers

to unasked questions, he launches into a series of uncoordinated explanations that are largely unnecessary, thereby prompting his female owner to remark rhetorically: *Kedu ka agadi nwoke di ka gi si ezuzu ka ewu?*: why would a man of such an advanced age as you behave as stupidly as a goat? (Nwadike 1989:18). Many of the servants in these dramatic works are addressed in such uncomplimentary language by other characters in these works and we examine a few below.

### **Perception of *nwa odibo* by other characters: The verbal insults**

Characters in the dramatic works with whom the servant interacts with perceive him in different ways. In many of the instances in the drama, their owners see them as indispensable; they are needed for several roles not convenient for their owners to perform by virtue of their position in the family. Surely, the duties of Udumgbo, Okechi and Ibe in the royal household of Chief Olulu (Eneore 1982) are assignments that cannot be taken up by persons that have any iota of conscience. Similarly, we observe the important position of Maduekwe's (1993) Echi in the life of his female owner Mgbokwo, whom he fondly calls *nne m ukwu* (my distinguished mother). Mgbokwo, despite her frequent use of harsh, abusive words on her servant, appears to be fond of him even as she finds him very wanting in natural intelligence. She and her husband have stated that Echi's behaviour is a panacea to heartache (Maduekwe 1993:39 and 56). She finds him quite indispensable, and often wonders aloud what the situation would have been for her, if she did not have a servant as loyal as Echi. Her wayward son Chikwe is aware of this fondness, and has accused her of partiality:

Ama m ri na oka eju gi afo iwere Echi mere nwa nwoke di n'ulo a, chupu m; ma chi kere anyi dum ekechaala, nye anyi onodu: I'm quite aware of the fact that you would have been satisfied to let Echi assume the position of the male child in this household, and to chase me out of it. However, God our creator has assigned us our positions (Maduekwe 1993:40).

Mgbokwo's implicit confidence in her servant is clearly demonstrated by her insistence that he should be enlisted in the precarious expedition for the rescue of her last daughter, Obiageri. Mgbokwo sees this journey as an easy task for her servant Echi if only he is enlisted as part of the team, even as her only son shows open pessimism in joining. Mgbokwo showers her praises on Echi's indispensability:

O buru na o ga-akari unu akuku ka m dunyere unu odogwu m bu Echi; Ama m ya na o na-acho imere m ihe obula na-akpa m: If this is going to be a Herculean task for you, I shall enlist my hero Echi. I do know that he desires to attend to all my needs (Maduekwe 1993:65).

As much as Mgbokwo shows obvious trust and fondness for her servant Echi, she perceives him as stupid, shallow-minded, and credulous also. Many servants in the works of fiction under survey are presented by writers in this light with the result that their owners and other characters in the works treat them with little respect and dignity. Such is the treatment received by Echi, whose female owner, Mgbokwo abuses on a constant basis as follows: '*Nwoke makakwu a'*: this stupid man (Maduekwe 1993:38), '*Lee ukwu oso ya, dawu dawu dawu dawn, ka akpa ji'*: see his running footsteps, dawu dawu dawu dawu, like a sack of yams (Maduekwe 1993:39). Echi is shown in the play to be a mature man too old to still be a servant but for his material poverty and limited intelligence. Thus he is insulted by his owner because of his unfortunate situation in the following words: '*Uchu gbakwa gi agadi nwoke nu'*: may you be accursed, you old man (Maduekwe 1993:55).

Other members of the family do not treat Echi with any respect either, hence the youngest daughter, Obiageli calls him '*agadi nwoke na-agba odibo'*: an elderly man that is still in servitude (Maduekwe 1993:30) in his face. Another name that Obiageli uses to insult Echi is '*akakpo a na-eti aku n ikpere'*: the dwarf upon whose knee one cracks the palm kernel (Maduekwe 1993:31). She further uses the following abusive words, all in an attempt to anger the servant Echi: '*Agala luru nwaanyi, muru umu nke gi. Noro ebe a na-efe umu onye ozo'*: If you like do not ever consider getting married and raising your own children. Remain here and worship another person's children (Maduekwe 1993:31). Chikwe insults him in another scene: '*Zuzupu ebe a, agadi nwoke na-agba odibo'*: Get away from here with your stupidity, the old-man-servant (Maduekwe 1993:53). '*Ugo na udele ha na-eriko ihe? Ka ha na-asako ahu?'*: Do the eagle and the vulture eat together? Or do they take their baths together? (Maduekwe 1993:53).

Similarly, Nwaozuzu's (1998) Oti and Orie receive few compliments from their female owner, Obiageli, who uses the verbal instruments of name-calling as well as words of threat to humiliate them. She tells her male servant Oti that the goat is more knowledgeable than he is (Nwaozuzu 1998:11). She hushes him at other times, in the following words: '*Mechie gi onu jee mewe ihe e ziri gi'*: shut up your mouth and go back to your duties (Nwaozuzu 1998:11). To Orie, she threatens: '*M tie gi ihe ebe a i nwuo'*: if I dare beat you up you will be dead (Nwaozuzu 1998:16). In the works of Okediadi (2002), Nwaadi, the servant does not fare better as Okezie his master rains down the following curses at him: '*Egbe igwe gbagbuo gi, onye nzuzu'*: May the thunder strike you dead, the stupid one (Okediadi 2002:49). And, Nwadike's (1989) Arisa appears quite used to the rain of abuses from his male and female owners: '*Onye nzuzu'*: stupid person; the goat (Nwadike

1989:18), 'Aturu mmadu': the human-sheep, 'zuzupu m n'ihu': Get out from my face with your stupidity (Nwadike 1989:28).

In some instances, it does appear that the insults received by the servants in these plays are less due to their limited intelligence than the mood of their owners at those points in the dramatic scene. It is observed that some of these servants are victims of scapegoatism, as many receive larger doses of verbal abuses when other issues not caused by the servants provoke their owners. Such is the case with Nwaozuzu's (1998) Orie, whose owner, Obiageli insults shortly after a brawl with her husband, Ezenwata over suspicions of extramarital affairs with her husband's best friend, Onyema. The same situation will also be seen to be at work in Maduekwe's (1993), play, as Echi is shouted upon by his owner after receiving the bad news of her daughter's decampment from the boarding school. In Nwadike (1989), Arisa's female owner is troubled by childlessness, and uses the servant as a scapegoat, comparing his stupidity and her situation of childlessness. In spite of all these verbal humiliations, none of the servants in the eight plays, except Nwadike's (1989) Arisa seems to bear any ill feeling towards his or her owner. We now look at the servant's self-perception of his function in the family.

### ***Nwa odibo: Self-perception in the family network***

Observations from the eight dramatic works under study reveal that all the servants appear quite content with their functions and roles. They do not complain, and each gives out his or her best according to the demands of the family he or she lives in. For example, the servants of Eneore's (1982) paramount ruler carry out their master's assassination orders, wrong imprisonment and other forms of jungle justice. They do not for once question the moral justification for these unlawful acts, and they act with as much precision and immediacy as demanded by their mentor and ruler of the community. Nwaozuzu's (1998) Orie and Oti appear happy as they attend to their daily chores, quite contented that they have quite enough food to eat (Nwaozuzu 1998:142). Nwadike's (1989) Arisa sings happily as he attends to his routine duties of house cleaning, and would occasionally take a few draws from the bottle of whisky, stored in the cupboard in the sitting room. He is nevertheless angered that his owners as well as their family friend constantly insult him through uncomplimentary names, as revealed by his grudging speech to himself:

*Nne m ukwu kpoo m ewu, nna m ukwu akpoo m ewu, Ngozi akpoo m ewu. Amaghikwanu m ma adi m ka ewu. Ha kpochaakwa m ewu na aturu, ubochi nile mu na ha bikwa; m na-agara ha ozi. Ya diwanu: My madam calls me the goat, my master calls me the goat. Ngozi calls me the goat. I'm not sure*

if I have the features of the goat. They call me the goat and the sheep, yet I live with them and serve them. Not to worry (Nwadike 1998:35-6).

By far, any one that reads Maduekwe's (1993) drama would find the servile character of Echi a fascinating one indeed. Despite his over age, supposed stupidity and very poor financial family background, Echi refuses to be humiliated or intimidated by members of his temporary household. With the exception of his direct owners who are also the heads of the family that he serves, Echi does not treat with kid gloves the attitudes of the children. Despite the insulting words of especially his female owner Mgbokwo, Echi still demonstrates steadfast love and respect for her, but does not reserve much of these for her irresponsible children. At any opportunity he has to give them a piece of his mind, Echi never lets such an opportunity pass unused. In fact, Echi is often the one that initiates the insults he receives from the children, referring to their youngest daughter, Obiageri as '*ike eru ala*' 'one whose buttocks are never seated'- a metaphor for one that is perpetually absent from home (Maduekwe 1979:30). To the only son of the house, Echi refers as '*onye njenje*' 'one that is always on the move'- an idea similar to the earlier one he has used for Obiageri (Maduekwe 1979:53). Echi does not appear bothered by the children's insults on him, so far as he has an opportunity to give each a piece of his own mind. He seizes the opportunity of his owners' absence from the scene to address Chikwe, in the following words:

*Leenu nwa ure, nwa njo, nwa ntuchapu, onu mmnya...Lee nwoke abughi nwoke na ezi na ulo ebe o bu okpara ga-anochi anya nna ya ma o nwuo:*  
Look at the child of filth, the bad child, the child that should be put out, a drunk. Look at a man not man enough in a family where he is to take after his father upon his father's death (Maduekwe 1993:53).

As Chikwe fires back at him with other invectives, Echi appears unperturbed by the insanity-accusation directed upon him by his opponent, choosing rather to assert the uniqueness of his behaviour, in his own words:

*I si na m bu onye nzuzu, ka m buruwa; ma mara na mu bu onye ara ji uche m awi:* If you say I'm a fool let me be, but you should realize that I'm a mad person with a conscious mind (Maduekwe 1993:53).

On the surface level it is not clear why Echi behaves like an under-aged child in the presence of his owners, but displays in their absence, remarkable sense of intelligence, self-dignity, and a sharp analytical focus, all of which run contradictory to his supposed imbecility for which he is largely accused. Echi may rightly be described as a servant with a unique sense of self-importance, his apparent show of stupidity notwithstanding. Even as he rains down insults upon the debauched Obiageri for the heartache she has caused her

family Echi carries the pots outside to wash, leaving on his trail one parting insult to her:

*Ka m ga mee ihe m na-aga ime. obughi ka nwa ngana nogide m ebe a* (let me go and continue with my work, this lazy child should not take much of my time (Maduekwe 1993:32).

On the whole, servants in many Igbo drama do not function as simpletons, even as many are presented as such in the Igbo dramatic works; they are there to fulfil other very important roles that help in the development of the plots of these works. We now examine some of their roles in the construction of the dramatic plot.

### **The servant as the building block of the dramatic plot**

The appearance of servants in some Igbo drama is very brief, such as being summoned into the dramatic scene with a brief instruction, which they leave immediately to attend to. In such cases, their impacts in the drama are not very strong, as their functions appear to be the enhancement of their owners' status as persons of repute and means. Such a role may be seen to be the case with Onyekwonwu's (1991) *Aligwoeke*, who appears only once as his master and paramount ruler, Eze Omaliko summons him to his royal presence. Similarly, Nwadike's (1990) *Umelo* is summoned only once to the presence of his owner and paramount ruler of the community, simply known as Eze. In another drama, Nwadike (2000) enlists two characters: Obuzuo and Ibekwe as servants of Emuka and Iloka respectively, but only Ibekwe appears, although very briefly in the dramatic plot. The servant Ibekwe has appeared at the early part of the drama to usher in a visitor to the presence of his master, Iloka. He also appears towards the end of the drama as his master orders him to inform the town crier to announce an open invitation to the whole members of the community. Just like the servants in Onyekwonwu (1991) and Nwadike (1990), the speech and appearance of Nwadike's (2000) Ibekwe in the dramatic scene is highly limited, and his appearance seems premised on reasserting his master's status as a man of untrammelled wealth and power. The servants of Chief Olulu in Eneore (1982) namely, Udumgbo, Okechi and Ibe do not only help to statutorily assert the powerful status of their master, they are the instruments of their master's power. However, much as they appear at several times in the dramatic scenes, their speeches are as limited as those of the others examined above, for they appear in these scenes under the instances of their owners. The briefness of appearance of the servants above may be contrasted with the sustained appearance of Arisa (Nwadike 1989) and the ubiquity of Echi (Maduekwe 1993) and Orie and Oti (Nwaozuzu 1998).

The character of the servant Arisa may rightly be described as more sustained than the brief appearances of others examined above. He has interacted with more characters than his counterparts examined above, speaking first with a visitor, Ngozi (Nwadike 1989:16-17), his female owner Nnenna (Nwadike 1989:18 and 22) and with his male owner Ikechukwu (Nwadike 1989:27-8). On another occasion, Arisa is summoned by his female owner who sends him out with a letter to a prophet in connection with her ceaseless search for an end to her childless state (Nwadike 1989:35).

In a similar vein, Maduekwe's (1993) Echi, and Nwaozuzu's (1993) Orié and Oti may rightly be described as servants upon whose actions the major dramatic plot is built, hence our use of the word ubiquitous to describe each. Echi does not answer true calls only; he answers imaginary calls too, hence his constant unwarranted presence at several dramatic scenes. Furthermore, the servant Echi interacts directly with all the members of the family with the exception of Amaka, perhaps because the latter is always away from home in her struggle to provide for her poor parents and two irresponsible siblings. Even without any dramatic interaction with Amaka, Echi reserves his comment for her work overload:

*O kwa Nwamaka na-eede ura nile a? Nwokpuru, atara m ya uta; ebe o na-adoli ka ya kpachie ego yafuru efu? Ma ebe o kacha bu ma o ga-ekwekwa m hie ura tupu oke okpa akwaa mbu, etetakwa m:* Is it not Nwamaka that is heaving out these snores? Poor thing, do I blame her, as she labors to make up for her stolen money? But most important is whether she would spare me some sleep before the first cock-crow and my rising up again (Maduekwe 1993:54).

Earlier than now, Amaka had fallen a victim in the hands of tricksters who duped her of her entire business earnings, and her plight does not escape unnoticed by Echi the servant as seen in his above comments.

Orié and Oti in the works of Nwaozuzu (1998) also appear in several scenes as they answer their owner's calls as well as attend to their servile duties including fetching water for family use. By far the dramatic importance of Oti and Orié comes out in bold relief, as their male owner Ezenwata leaves with his friend Onyema for a trip out of town.

The same Ezenwata is found dead under mysterious circumstances early in the morning the next day, inside his own room in the family-house. As Ezenwata prepares for the botched journey with his friend earlier on, he appears to seek the permission of his two servants even as his wife comments that the brief absence from home does not necessitate a speech as detailed as the one being made by him. Subsequently, when a voice that sounds as his own, announces his return very late at night, Oti the servant is the person he

calls to let him in, long before the arrival of Obiageli to the scene. Thus, Oti unwittingly let into the house his master's friend, Onyema, who has impersonated Ezenwata in order to quietly dump the latter's lifeless body inside the bedroom and leave immediately before any member of the deceased's family would see him. As investigations into the mysterious death of Ezenwata rages, Oti the male servant is less helpful in providing clues surrounding the death as he is in stressing the abundance of eatables in the house! It is the female servant Orié that provides a clue about the estranged relationship between the couple, Ezenwata and Obiageli, a few weeks before the mysterious death of Ezenwata.

Servants provide subtle clues that assist the development of the dramatic plots, not as seen in the contributions of Orié alone in providing important clues that would absolve her female owner from suspicion of murder, but also in other ways as demonstrated by Maduekwe's (1993) Echi. His language can rightly be described as ominous words that provide important clues that help in the artistic build-up of the dramatic plot. His retort to the family's decision to send Obiageri to college turns out prophetic:

*Obiageri m hucharala odinihu ya, mara na o togbo n 'efu. Uru gini ka ije koleji ga-abadiri ya? Onye mmadu amabeghi ma o ga-esite ebe ahu gbafuo, sowe ihe uto uwa: Obiageri, whose future I already foresee, will come to nothingness. Of what value will her going to college be for her? Nobody knows if she will escape from there, going after the pleasures of life (Maduekwe 1993:32).*

In the end, Obiageri does exactly as Echi has predicted: leaving school without her parents' knowledge, entering a community of outcasts as second wife to a strange man, giving birth to a baby under what the community regards as abominable circumstances, and losing her life in the process. For the irresponsible son of his owners, Echi predicts:

*Abughi nwoke gi a ga-ala gi n 'ihi; ka anyi kuru n 'aka: Your unmanly behavior will result in your destruction. Let's make a bet (Maduekwe 1979).*

The cowardly Echi is struck to death by lightning as he unwittingly goes with Nwamaka on a rescue mission of Obiageri and her baby from the strange land of Gudele.

The important roles of these servants in the building up of the plots of the drama notwithstanding, their servile roles remain ill transformed, even as the rest of the major characters get a fair deal of poetic justice. Other main characters like the owners of the servants are seen to assume new roles by the end of the work, but *nwa odibo* is still steeped in servitude, with no resolution to his or her state. Oti and Orié remain servants even as their

surviving female owner, Obiageli, the wife of their former male owner remarries and takes them to her new home as servants (Nwaozuzu 1998:142-3). No mention is made of Arisa 'the goat', as the ceaseless search for a child by the couple is finally resolved (Nwadike 1989:53-7). Two of the servants of the paramount ruler are captured while one dies with him as each carries on, the orders of their master to torture others as well as defend their owner (Eneore 1982:76-7). The conditions of Maduekwe's (1993) Echi do not appear readily changed even as the only son of the family dies tragically. These unresolved dramatic servile characters, the self-perception of the servants as well as other peoples' perception of them, have quite important significance in our discussions of subjectivity in Igbo indigenous family.

### **Subjectivity in servitude and the indigenous Igbo family**

The characters, roles and resolutions of members of the family, including temporary members like the servants are enormously varied in indigenous Igbo-African social system, and in this instance, we note that writers are yet to recapture the variegated forms of servitude. For instance, writers of Igbo drama are yet to situate and recapture the female servant and her roles in the indigenous family arrangement.

Each member of the family does occupy a heterogeneous social space that is partially allocated in such a way that not every one has an equivalent space. The family form and ideology, as re-articulated in Igbo written drama define and organize the concepts of liberty and of symmetry in human relations, and in this instance, the servant balances contentedly at lowest rung of the ladder. Using the term of contentment presupposes that family members assume their roles to operate on a natural, acceptable and commonsensical axis. The ways of being an individual, called subject positions, is central to the theory of subjectivity- the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions, which may largely account for the relationship between the individual and the society. The social relations entered by every individual including the family pre-exists him or her, and each learns their modes of operation as well as the values whose maintenance they strive. One would describe the roles of the servile characters as natural roles; yet this is only one out of the numerous ways to understand them. As succinctly stated by Chris Weedon:

to appeal to the 'natural' is one of the most powerful aspects of common-sense thinking, but it is a way of understanding social relations which denies history and the possibility of change for the future (Weedon 1994:4).

The 'subjective' is often described as an action or belief that is based on one's ideas or opinions rather than facts; thus there is the concomitant belief that such ideas or opinions that are not based on facts are false or unfair.

However, the extent to which moral values and knowledge are based on truth as we see them in the world is highly contentious, for humans see realities only to the extent that the communal and social world of their existence permit. An Igbo proverb states succinctly: *Mmadu anaghi arogaru nro ebe o gatubeghi*: One's dream experiences do not get beyond familiar places. Though this is but a limited view, it makes sense in our understanding of the way people make an everyday sense of their lives. And, this way that people make sense of their lives is, according to Weedon (1994) 'a necessary starting point for the understanding of how power relations structure society' (Weedon 1994:8). Central to the theory of subjectivity is the role of language, and this brings into focus the significance of Igbo dramatic works in the analysis of subjectivity in indigenous Igbo concept of servitude.

Actual as well as possible forms of social organization including their likely political and social consequences are defined and contested at the site of language. Language is also the site where our sense of selves and our sense of others are defined and constructed and contested. Through language, social policies in the modern world, occupational structures as well as sexist attitudes that flow from subjective assumptions take coherent shapes, which, in the words of Louise Howe (1972) end up 'determining the lives of everyone within the family' (Howe 1972:21). With the exception of a few, all servants in the Igbo dramatic works under survey appear to accept their positions as a preexisting role to which they have no control over. We further note Chikwe's statement (in Maduekwe 1993:40) above, about the pre-destined positions of asymmetrical privilege between the heir and the servant in the family social life. Chikwe's statement demonstrates the exclusive right of the oldest or only son of an Igbo family to take up the mantle of leadership in the event of his father's death. This family-inheritance stance already outlined in the consciousness of Chikwe, marks out the acceptance of the principle of inequality in interpersonal relations. Transposed into an ideological state, these create the inequality of humans, of peoples and races. The authoritarian family structure, which best describes the household of Mgbokwo and Ukoha, is one that sees the father figure as the head of the household, yet leaves major family decisions to the mother. In favour of this observation is the work of Emmanuel Todd, which notes:

For, strangely enough, the emphasis placed upon the father-son tie does not prevent the authoritarian family from giving women, in practice, an important position (Todd 1989:64).

The lukewarm attitude of Chikwe may be traced to his father's incapability of imparting the necessary models of hard work and diligence in his only male child, being himself a lukewarm father-head. Argues Todd:

The authoritarian family structure is a mass of contradictions. It seeks to apply the principle of authority and produces anarchy as much as discipline. It simultaneously creates a rigid family core, shaping and stifling the individual in its vertical structure, and frees men who are rejected by the domestic group and have no previously defined place in the society...Finally, it emphasizes continuity in the male line yet gives women a major role (Todd 1989:65).

With the tragic death of Chikwe, the implicit position of Echi the old, foolish servant in the network of family roles and representation is highly debatable.

Subjectivity organizes different positions of family members, and in this case, the writers of these eight dramatic works are doing just that, as they construct the character of the servant including his roles, perception of self as well as his perception by other characters. Needless to say, writers unconsciously reproduce images and concepts believed to be central to the understanding of the family social life including the definitions of servitude therein. As much as servants are often persons from more disadvantaged families than the ones they serve, the extent to which servitude and humour, limited intelligence and stupidity coalesce is highly disputable when the theory of subjectivity is used to critique these works. Similarly, the extent to which owners act out various forms of misplaced aggression towards their servants remains yet to be seen as an action specific to these servants than a symptom of power asymmetry in the family network. As some of the works show, it is not only servants that are spoken of in humiliating words by their owners, the asymmetrical power structure in the family appears to also be premised on who has the right to use insults, what we may call hate speech over the other. It has been pointed out elsewhere (see Chukwukere 2003) that it is banal to lay a comparison between the perception of women and other less privileged people in the society. However, the similarity between the 'harmless' hate speech directed at servants by their owners, and ones directed at wives by their husbands in some of these works can hardly be ignored:

meghekwa onu gi ozo ugbu, Amadioha amabipu gi isi. I na-aju m ajuju?: If you open your mouth any further, thunder will strike off your head. Are you questioning me? (Okediadi 2002:38).

The above words are used by Okezie to address his wife Chinyere over a dispute about Okezie's planned inheritance of his dead brother's wife. Also insulting are the humiliating false accusations of infidelity levelled against

Obiaegeli by her husband Ezenwata (Nwaozuzu 1998:24-29). Although the two husbands above have initiated the insults, wives are observed to take unkindly to these insults, as they react in ways that will be seen as disrupting to their husbands' settled allegations and ways of thinking, at those points in time. The subsequent beating of Chinyere by her husband may be seen as overt demonstration of physical rather than mental superiority of each member of the couple in a marital relationship. When these characteristics are examined in the context of servants' positions we observe that servants stand as victims of inferiority, seen from the eyes of their constructors (the Igbo writers) as well as the male and female characters in the works of fiction.

The theory of subjectivity accounts for the way that the principle of selectivity is the hallmark of Igbo writers' construction of the servant. Selectivity in this instance ensures the construction of reality that excludes as well as denies other interpretations of reality. States Robert Wuthnow:

The selective aspect of human consciousness means that reality, as it is perceived is always something less than what might have been perceived. It also means that different realities can be constructed from the same objects and events, depending on the characteristics upon which attention is centered (Wuthnow 1976:62).

We agree with Wuthnow's (1976) further observation that reality is constructed in accordance to the purposes, predisposition, past experiences, and the symbols and imageries that a conceiver brings to bear on it. And, if servitude presupposes an unquestionable acceptance of roles including abusive ones, then the behaviour of many of the servants in Igbo works of fiction equals none other in this regard. Quite important therefore, is the role of internalization of oppression in the theory of subjectivity. As Paulo Freire rightly points out:

The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to reject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility... It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion (Freire 1997:29).

And to advance the principle of freedom, the importance of hate speech such as we see in the asymmetrical relationship between the servant and other members of the household cannot be overemphasized. Samuel Walker's (1994) enunciation of hate speech (recapturing a Minnesota ordinance) as any symbol, which arouses anger, alarm or resentment in others on the basis of race, colour, creed, religion or gender, is highly a limited conception indeed. This is because subjectivity disallows the perception of an action or speech as abusive by a person so addressed, even as such an action or speech is, as

evidenced by its apparent acceptance by mot servile characters of Igbo dramatic works.

On a final note, we see the character of Echi in Maduekwe (1993) as a dynamic one indeed, one that we may rightly describe as a cat with nine lives. The author, by his artistic creation of the servile character of Echi, does demonstrate that the social embeddedness of a subject is not total and final; subjectivity as a social process provides space for questioning, challenging as well as rupturing the very premise upon which shared assumptions are instituted. Regenia Gagnier (1991) does point out that change can occur through the subject's mediation and 'transformation of structures and systems, including systems as large as language or the state' (Gagnier 1991:10). Echi contributes his own quota as he responds to the stifling structures of the social life in his own unique way: acceptance, denial, questioning and rupturing those. The complex situations that Echi finds himself in his temporary family makes him to take up multiple positions, some of which may be interpreted as deliberate efforts to 'act the script', reserved in the culture for the 'poor foolish servant'. At the same time that he maintains a balance as the family powerhouse in terms of physical strength, Echi the fool is also the prophet, who tries to warn the recalcitrant members of the family about their impending doom, which comes to pass at the end of the dramatic work. Surely, subjectivity may not be accepted and justified only; it can be questioned too as well as ruptured. In all instances, Maduekwe's (1993) Echi may be seen to be playing these multiple roles at once.

### **Conclusion**

Family roles are premised on several socio-cultural, economic, political, attitudinal as well as linguistic assumptions, and in these instances, the role of the servant is encapsulated in those assumptions from which other members of the family take up their own roles. In practice, these rarely conform to the status quo, even as writers of Igbo drama try to grant them relative stability, especially the roles, self-perception as well as others' perception of the servile character. Surely, the servant in the eight Igbo dramatic works share certain common attributes including their loyalty, hard work and acceptance of their servile roles. However, the extent to which these characterizations are premised on writers' taken-for-granted assumptions, is given a necessary impetus in our theory of subjectivity. As this paper argues, servitude is not pre-given; acceptance of servitude including the verbal humiliation as well as unresolved conditions does not translate to servile contentment. Subjectivity helps us account for the ways in which the oppressor as well as the oppressed help justify the discriminatory practices. It also enables us account for the ways in which an oppressed group may question,

challenge as well as rupture the marginalized attitudes of the society against them; attitudes believed to come all too 'naturally' because of the conditions of existence among members of the society. An Igbo proverb remarks rightly: Uto ndu ekweghi si mara etu a didebere: The sweetness of life disallows one from conceiving of the plight of others.

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