

HERO TURNED VILLAIN: A CLOSE READING OF J.P CLARK'S *OZIDI SAGA*

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Abstract

*Heroism is an accepted act of bravery to earn admiration, social recognition and communal validation. In all cultures, heroes are remembered in stories, songs and performances as model of human valor. However, when heroism takes excessive, irrational, and destructive form, the same society recast the individual as a villain. This paper critically examines J.P. Clark's Ozidi Saga, focusing on the protagonist, Ozidi, a celebrated avenger who later transformed to a destructive force. Drawing on postcolonial criticism, tragic hero framework, and performance theory to examine how Clark adapts Ijaw oral tradition to the modern stage, the gap between heroism and tyranny is quizzed. Though, starting as a courageous person, Ozidi's vicious, violence, and unrestrained brashness ultimately strip him of heroism. Thus, this paper reveals that Ozidi's expedition illustrates the ambivalence of power. Ozidi's trajectory is well articulated in the Yoruba saying, *afi fila perinojokan lo n niyimo* (he who fells an elephant with a cap command short-lived respect). The tragedy of Ozidi proves the instability in heroism that is based on violence. It, thus, demonstrates broader socio-political realities in postcolonial Africa where leaders transform from liberators to tyrants. Through the exploration of the thematic, structural, and cultural elements of the play, the study concludes that although heroic deeds are commendable; however, where ethical restraint is lacking, heroes can turn villains.*

Keywords: Hero, Villain, Ozidi Saga, J.P Clark, Ambivalence of Power, Close Reading.

Introduction

The concept of heroism is among the oldest and most complex idea that humankind still wrestles with today. Throughout history and cross-culturally, heroes have served as manifestations of collective ideals, ethical aspirations and existential struggles. From the classical epics of ancient Greece to the oral traditions in Africa, heroic figures have been lauded as transformers who shape collective memory and identity by their actions. Heroes like Achilles, Odysseus, and Gilgamesh exhibit this duality of heroism: "equal parts greatness and vulnerability" (Campbell 223). Likewise, African traditions do not provide heroes as mere superhuman beings but specific embodiments of deep communal values. Recent scholarship on African oral aesthetics further argues that heroic identity in African narratives is fundamentally communal and performative rather than merely individualistic, emphasizing the interdependence between heroism, ritual and collective moral consciousness (Abe 44; Sone 5).

In African cosmology, gods and heroic figures like Sango, Ogun, and Oduduwa in Yoruba (or Ozidi in Ijaw) religion engage these aspects as much as they do their collective responsibilities with the people... (Okpewho 45). The African notion of collectivism sets themselves apart from the Western heroic individual, promoting responsibility and restraint for societal wellbeing. In African oral narrative, as Ruth Finnegan notes, heroes are typically figure whose actions cannot be disentangled from the moral expectations of their society (Finnegan 78). Heroism, then, is not determined solely by power but by civility.

This idea is made much more complex when one considers the classical philosophical understanding of heroism. Aristotle, for “instance, defines the tragic hero in Poetics as a noble individual whose downfall is caused by a fundamental flaw or hamartia” (54). This formulation emphasizes the essential instability of heroism, since greatness carries within itself the seeds of destruction. In short, Thomas Carlyle in his ‘great man theory’ asserts that “history is determined by extraordinary people whose impact hails society (12). As true as Carlyle’s theory portend however, history has proven that with such elevation comes great peril, for power left unchecked invariably descends into tyranny.

Joseph Campbell’s theory of the monomyth, or “hero’s journey,” introduces a structural basis for understanding heroic narratives across cultures. In brief, Campbell states that the hero is on a cyclical journey of departing and returning to restore balance in society (Campbell 30). Though his framework was irrefutable, it also good to note that it highlights a core paradox: qualities that encourage heroic success—namely, bravery and drive. The qualities can lead to ruin if in excess.

It is in this tension between heroism and excess that J. P. Clark’s *Ozidi Saga* finds particular significance. Based on the Ijaw oral epic as told by Okabou Ojobolo, the play dramatises the mythical journey of Ozidi, a warrior whose fate is to avenge his father’s murder. The heroic avenger of the opening passages of the performance eventually becomes a man-made monster through unnecessary violence whose actions serve to destabilise the community he would protect most (Clark 45). It’s a redefined heroism that calls into question the very definitions of power, justice and moral wherewithal. The Yoruba proverb *afi fila perinojokan lo niyimo* — “the one who kills an elephant with a cap enjoys short-lived recognition” — offers a culturally specific context for interpreting this trajectory. The saying captures the fleeting shine of those general —great but unsustainable acts, particularly when glory tumbling from soars. It indicates that heroism, cut free from restraint and ethical consideration, is self-cancelling.

Hence, this study interrogates the transformation of Ozidi from hero to villain through a multidisciplinary lens drawing on postcolonial theory that guides much of literature written after Empire and is by definition interdisciplinary; tragic-hero critical sources that guide dramatically all literatures’ transformations and bifurcates to embrace performance studies. It contends that Clark’s *Ozidi Saga* is not simply a reworking of an indigenous epic for the modern stage, but also an incisive commentary on power and governance in postcolonial African societies. With its tracing of Ozidi’s descent, the play elucidates how liberation and tyranny can be separated by a thin line, so that it can stand up as cautionary contemplation of the ambivalence of heroism.

Postcoloniality, Tragedy, and Performance

To unpack Ozidi's metamorphosis from the Siddhartha Buddha to the Satanic Deity in its truest form, this paper undertakes a tripartite theoretical engagement with postcolonial criticism, tragic-hero theory and performance studies. All these frameworks offer crucial understandings of the cultural, political and aesthetic aspects of Clark's *Ozidi Saga*.

Postcolonial Criticism and the Leadership Crisis

Postcolonial criticism is an important tool for analyzing how discourses of power and resistance are formulated in postcolonial societies. The Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon writes that the liberation struggle generates leaders who are in danger of mirroring all the oppressive apparatuses of colonial powers once they attain political office (Fanon 148). This dichotomy speaks to the vicious cycle of violence, in which freedom fighter and dictator become indistinguishable.

Ngũgĩ waThiong'o further expands this critique by placing greater focus on the role of culture and language in forming postcolonial identity. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi argues that literature from Africa must refute colonial epistemologies whilst addressing internal contradictions in post-colonial realities (Ngũgĩ 28). Within this frame, *Ozidi Saga* can be interpreted as an allegory of postcolonial governance in which the hero's pursuit of justice becomes an exercise in excessive despotism.

Ozidi's metamorphosis echoes the arc of many post-independence African leaders, who, once having emerged as icons of emancipation turned into agents of oppression. His untrammelled violence embodies the dangers of power uncoupled from accountability or restraint. So Clark's play moves beyond its mythological origins to reflect contemporary socio-political realities.

Hamartia and the Theory of the Tragic-Hero

Another important lens through which to view Ozidi's character is the Aristotelian concept of tragedy. As Aristotle states, the tragic hero is a person of noble birth whose demise is due to an inherent imperfection- hamartia (Aristotle 54). This flaw is not so much a moral weakness as it is an excess of a particular virtue. Ozidi's most conspicuous trait—is his persistent pursuit of revenge, which serves as his hamartia. What starts out as a moral call to avenge his father's becomes increasingly senseless, escalating to carpet-bombing conduct. His lack of moderation turns him from a figure to be admired into one to be feared and alienated.

This framework is further expanded by Arthur Miller's modern redefinition of tragedy. In "Tragedy and the Common Man," Miller contends that not only kings and nobles can be subjects of tragedy; rather, it is whenever an individual's sense of dignity clashes with structures in society that tragedy occurs (Miller 3). Ozidi's plight then is more than mythological; it is human, starkly evoking the abiding tension of individual agency forced to contend with networks of collective responsibility.

The Ritual Aesthetic and Performance Theory

This investigation clarifies the formal and cultural potencies of *Ozidi Saga* and its resonance to performance theory. Making 'What and When': Richard Schechner sees a performance not as an

object in itself, but rather as a social process comprised of ritual, play and so on (Schechner 35). For this reason, performance is not only representational but transformative, the defining sound of individual and collective consciousness. Clark's adaptation of the Ijaw epic preserved its performative dimensions, from music to dance, mime and narration. These ensembles create a complex, multi-layered theatrical experience that speaks to the communal aspects of African oral traditions. Contemporary studies on African oral performance further maintain that performance in African dramatic traditions functions as a socially situated and participatory act where audience, performer and space remain fluidly interconnected (Mnenuka 36; Ighile 166). Karin Barber says that performance in Africa strives to dissolve positive fiction of artist and audience into participatory aesthetic that reiterates shared values (Barber 67).

This dimension is further illuminated by Wole Soyinka's theory of ritual drama. According to Soyinka, African theatre functions in a metaphysical plane that links the living with the dead and unborn (Soyinka 140). This connection is clear in both the interaction of the human and supernatural worlds, as well as the ritualistic structure of *Ozidi Saga*. The performative structure of the play opens itself intentionally for a multiplicity of perspectives. The narrator and chorus serve as a collective voice both lauding and lambasting Ozidi's deeds. This polyphony fragments a single reading of heroism, revealing its inherent ambiguity.

Heroic Archetype and Its Subversion

The opening movements of J. P. Clark's *Ozidi Saga* firmly locate its protagonist in the familiar dimensions of the heroic archetype. Ozidi's birth is shrouded in tragedy and destiny: he is born posthumously, after his father; a feared warrior has been murdered. This narration positioning fits with what Joseph Campbell calls the "child of destiny," a being whose life is dictated by forces outside of that which was ordinary (Campbell 319). Ozidi is not only a man from the outset; he represents something larger, with his story as an allegory for communal aspirations of justice and healing.

His grandmother Oreame is central to his heroic formation. As a guardian of mystical knowledge and ancestral power, she hurries his evolution and gives him supernatural powers. This framing event shades Ozidi into the auspices of myth where champions are frequently aided by heavenly or otherworldly principalities. His early wins against his father's assassins underscore his role as a communal avenger. "The people sang his name, for with each enemy fallen, they saw justice done and the land cleansed," says the narrator (Clark xx). Here, Ozidi serves the needs of a paradigm hero: he restores moral order, reclaiming respect for his bloodline.

But Clark intentionally undercuts this heroic arc. Instead of concluding with restoration, Ozidi's quest transforms into a harrowing spiral of violence. A mission that begins as morally justifiable slowly becomes stripped of its moral justification. This transformation, subtle yet profound: vengeance first packaged as justice, then a purpose in itself. As the story develops, Ozidi's retribution reaches not only his father's murderers but well beyond to those who pose no immediate threat. This escalation signals the figurative start of his transition from hero to tyrant.

This departure from the classical heroic model is important. Recent African literary criticism increasingly interrogates heroic masculinity and power within Nigerian cultural texts, arguing that excessive heroism often mutates into coercive dominance and authoritarian performance (Jemiluyi

35). In Campbell's monomyth, the hero's journey ends with a community-return (Campbell 193). Ozidi, however, does not complete this cycle. He does not bring renewal, but maintains instability. This failure reflects the challenges that Universalist frameworks have when addressing African narratives, where collective or communal ethics often trump individual merit and morality.

In Aristotelian terms, Ozidi's tragedy lies in hamartia or tragic flaw. His determination to avenge himself, while noble at first becomes extreme. According to Aristotle, tragedy comes from an unfortunate error — not vice (54). Ozidi's failure to see the bounds of his mission embodies this principle. His strength — his drive to avenge injustice — is also the force that undercuts him.

Responses to Ozidi's transformation by communities are particularly revealing. In African oral traditions, the hero is valued not as an individual but according to his contribution in achieving consensus (Okpewho 78). As Ozidi's actions threaten this balance, however, his status changes. The same community that once adored him now views him with fear. As the story goes, "the warrior they had hailed as savior now haunted their sleep... they most whispered his name in dread" (Clark xx). The monumental turn from admiration to a tyrant here emphasizes the fragility of heroism, when decoupled from collective deterrence.

As I see it, Clark's antagonistic deployment of the heroic archetype offers a critical intervention in discussions surrounding power. In denying Ozidi, a redemptive closure, the play critiques the romanticisation of violence that heroic discourse necessarily entails. It forces the audience to reckon with an uncomfortable fact of how history is written — that heroism and villainy cannot be understood without an awareness of context, restraint and ethical responsibility.

The Ambivalence of Power in J.P. Clark's *Ozidi Saga*: a textual analysis.

Drawing on the oral performances of Ojobolo Okabou, J. P. Clark's *Ozidi Saga* interrogates the precariousness of heroism within African cosmological and communal frameworks to present a compelling narrative. Although the protagonist, Ozidi, stands out as a divinely sanctioned avenger, his trajectory shows an ever-so-slow yet indubitable slide into undermining excess. This shift complicates the hero-villain binary, framing the narrative as both a mythic account and a socio-political allegory.

A careful reading of the text shows that Ozidi's justification for heroism lies in communal justice but is eventually undermined by bloodlust unmatched. Using textual evidence, this analysis argues that Clark builds Ozidi not as a tragic hero, but rather as one whose failure is marked by an inability to see the ethical limits of power.

The Ontological Violence of Ozidi's Birth: Prefiguring Heroic Excess.

J. P. Clark's *Ozidi Saga* does not simply reveal its protagonist through narrative exposition; it, rather, builds Ozidi into an ontological structure wherein violence is both origin and destination. From the moment of his birth, Ozidi's conditions make neutrality impossible. The murder of his father is not just a motivating incident - it's the foundational rupture that gives rise to all of Ozidi's life. The text articulates this state of affairs with vivid immediacy: "Before the child came into the world, his father had been cut down and the house thrown into mourning" (Clark, *Ozidi Saga* 11).

It is not an incidental moment; it encapsulates the violence that haunts Ozidi's identity. He is born not on a community at peace, but one already broken. Hence, it is not violence that Ozidi meets as an external reality—he receives his inheritance in the guise of identity. The part played by Ozidi's grandmother, Oreame, help to intensify this condition. Her choice to speed up Ozidi's development is not motherly care in the traditional way but an ideological gesture: "Should we wait for him to grow up while his father's blood cries out? No, he must now rise and answer it" (Clark 17).

This statement is crucial. It eliminates temporal development — what might provide for reflection, hesitation or moral formation — and substitutes immediacy. He is deprived of childhood, deprived of ethical maturation, and forced, instead, into a role defined by vengeance." Villainous, in effect, Clark fabricates a protagonist whose subjectivity is anticipated out of obligation.

Scholarly implications arise here: Ozidi is not an otherwise-conventional hero gone bad; rather, excess is built into his origin-story. His subsequent violence thus should not be interpreted as a deviation from that but rather as a logical extension. This is in accordance with other African oral cosmologies that require the restoration of lineage and ancestral disruption. By illustrating how restoration chased to extremes transform into unending violence, Clark makes this belief complex. From its very outset, Ozidi is representative of what we might call "prefigured tragic excess"; the state where the signs of catastrophe exist in-natura (as it were) upon arrival.

Ritual Violence and the Making of Heroic Legitimacy

Throughout the cycle's early movements, Ozidi's violence is not merely tolerated but ritualised and sacralised. Clark stages this second phase with care, through performative affirmation, songs and chants, shared call and response that turn slaughter into cultural imperative. After Ozidi's first acts of retribution, the story records: "The people gathered and raised their voices, saying it was determined that the wrong had been righted and the land made clean again" (Clark 30).

This passage is crucial because it shows that violence gets its legitimacy not from being right or wrong but from being communal. Ozidi is not heroically innate; he becomes heroic because his actions correspond with collective anticipations of how justice ought to be served and revenge performed. Significantly, the language of "cleansing" adds a ritual dimension. Violence here is understood as purification. It's not that the enemies are people—they're viruses infecting the social body. Their elimination restores equilibrium.

But Clark quietly endangers this legitimacy through its immersing with the possibility of expansion. If violence purges, then its logic can easily extend past necessity. The very mechanism that provides justification for Ozidi's initial actions also allows for their final excess. We see this in the ad absurdum performance of praise: "With each victory, the songs grew louder and with each song... called for even greater deeds" (Clark 42).

Here, the community becomes complicit. Their celebration does not simply react to violence—it calls for its perpetuation. Heroism, then, turns out to be a mutual construct: The hero acts but the community reinforce and magnify those actions. This moment is important from a scholarly perspective. This complicates an easy reading of Ozidi as an agent in his/her own right. Instead,

Clark lays out a system in which heroism is produced collectively — and so collectively implicated in its degeneration.

Heroism and Tyranny in *Ozidi Saga*: A Review.

African oral epics often frame the hero as a person of remarkable agency living within deep structures of community and history. In *The Ozidi Saga*, however, the revenge of Ozidi is no longer individualized but paradigmatic; what propels his narrative is the obligation to avenge the murder of his father. Yet, the epic also subverts this heroic ideal by registering a gradual transition from justified violence to kingly brutality. Isidore Okpewho and others have pointed out that such heroes of African epics must not only be vilified or celebrated without consideration of the cultural logic by which they are assigned value. And yet this same scholarship also shows that these heroes tend to be full of contradictions.

In his seminar work, *The Epic in Africa*, Okpewho sees revenge as an organizing concept in many African epics and points out that the hero's quest often amounts to a restoration of moral balance (Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa* 45). Within this structure, Ozidi's mission is not just personal but publicly authorized. The murder of Ozidi's father is an offence against political and moral order and his ensuing vengeance serves as corrective action. As Okpewho points out, the epic hero is classically constituted as "an embodiment of the aspirations and values of his society" (Okpewho 114). Ozidi's premature successes thus confirm his position as a legitimate cultural hero whose actions satisfy communal expectations.

In addition, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's transcription foregrounds the performative aspect of the epic, where audience involvement reinforces Ozidi's heroic self-image. In this communal context of the performance, his actions are constantly affirmed and thus become inscribed in a collective cultural unconscious that legitimizes his heroic efforts.

While this legitimacy is apparent at first, the structure of the epic actually reveals a substantial shift. Having achieved his primary goal of seeking vengeance on his father, Ozidi returns to a cycle of unending violence. This enduring violence represents a departure from the original justification of his moral rightness. Okpewho recognizes that epic heroes are prone to excesses, explaining that the same characteristics which elevate their status and lead them to heroic deeds also "reveal tendencies toward excess which threaten the very order [they seek] to defend" (Okpewho 52). This insight is key to understanding Ozidi's metamorphosis.

This escalation is also driven by the episodic nature of the narrative, in which each convoy introduces new challengers and maintains a cycle of violence. What starts as a focused act of revenge slowly becomes an endless cycle of conflict, implying that the power behind our hero has become self-sustaining rather than mission-driven. The descent from heroism into tyranny is most pronounced in Ozidi's loss of restraint. His actions are less and less governed by moral logic, while violence itself becomes an end. This move dovetailed with a broader critical apprehension of despotism as the exercise of power lacking moral consideration. One landmark point in the epic is Ozidi's slaying of his own grandmother, Oreame. Oreame is also a spiritual guide and protector, thus it serves as control and moral compass. Her death marks the collapse of the frameworks that

once governed Ozidi's authority. Without this guiding influence, his moral compass gets unstuck and he goes on a rampage.

Okpewho's observation that epic heroes need not "be moral exemplars" (Okpewho 120), but rather are typically figures whose greatness stands alongside their more serious shortcomings. Ozidi's trajectory demonstrates how the same characteristics that leads to heroic victory — strength, determination and fearlessness — can also be a springboard inward toward moral collapse when unchecked.

Rather than positioning heroism and tyranny as opposing terms, The *Ozidi Saga* foregrounds their interdependence. The same violent capacity that allows Ozidi to re-establish order also allows him to upset it. This duality highlights the inherent danger of heroic power. By foregrounding the consequences of excess, therefore, the epic implicitly challenges idealized conceptions of the hero. Ozidi's refusal to stop pursuing his violent objectives implies that heroism, decoupled from community oversight, is indistinguishable from tyranny. Thus, the story reads as a cautionary tale around unchecked power.

A close reading of The *Ozidi Saga*, favoured by critical engagement courtesy of Isidore Okpewho, suggests that the epic provides a complex and ambivalent view of heroism. Ozidi starts out as a paragon of justice and community responsibility, but his unrelenting violence eventually defeats the purpose of both.

The Limits of a Penance: When Justice Is Not Clean and Clear

This transition from anarchy to tyranny is not the result of a single cataclysmic break, but rather, creeping obsolescence. Clark announces this change with a slight dissonance in the narrative. At a critical moment, the text notes: "Enemies fell, yet without Rest did Ozidi's Hand Lie" (Clark 63). This is the point when excess begins to appear." The original goal — avenging his father — has been achieved, yet the violence continues. Without necessity, action becomes compulsion. Clark deepens this shift by communal unrest: "Some began to wonder if the spear was now thirsty for blood alone" (Clark 70).

This is a moment of deep interpretive fracture. The violence is no longer conceived as instrumental but autonomous. The weapon, then, virtually takes on a life of its own. Ozidi is not controlling violence anymore; he is being carried by it. The intellectual import here is the implosion of intentionality. Heroism is a matter of having a purpose — violence has to be applied for a good end. As that end dissolves, the same actions become morally illegible. Clark further reinforces this transition through tonal shift: "Where drums had been there was silence, and the silence spread like fear" (Clark 74). Silence replaces celebration. The performative affirmation that held Ozidi's identity aloft retreats, and what remains is uncertainty. This is the exact moment where heroism becomes destabilizing. So, the boundary of surplus is not determined by the volume of violence but by losing moral delineation. Ozidi crosses this line when he ceases to engage in any kind of filtration between force that is essential and force that is gratuitous.

Social Death of the Hero and Communal Rejection.

Within these African oral frameworks, the hero is one with the community. And his legitimacy now hinges on him/her being the embodiment of collective wellbeing. Once that alignment is

disrupted, the hero suffers what could be called social death. Clark describes that transformation with striking clarity: "They no longer called him savior; his name passed among them like a warning" (81). This change is not simply semantic — it's ontological. Ozidi's identity, then, is reconstituted by the community. That same name, which once inspired admiration, now inspires fear. The narrative deepens this rupture: "Children were hushed in his presence, and elders lowered their voices when speaking of him" (Clark 85).

Generational lines are drawn across reverence, replaced by fear. Ozidi becomes a displacing force, an everyday reality as well as an idea. He embodies the breakdown of moral order. It is important to note that Clark does not depict this rejection as an act of sudden betrayal. It arises as a logical response to Ozidi's behavior. It is not a capricious lack of confidence from the community but rather they retract recognition because he has grossly violated the moral code that defined his heroism. This strengthens a key argument from a scholarly angle: In African cosmology, heroism is conditional, relational and revocable. Ozidi's fall, then, is not just personal tragedy but communal reorientation. The community reclaims its moral borders by renaming him.

The Smallpox King and the Metaphysics of Limits

The encounter with the Smallpox King opens up a dimension beyond social judgment- cosmic limitation. While the community embodies ethical limits, the Smallpox King embodies ontological limits. This encounter, Clark frames as a different type of battle: It was "not an enemy of flesh and blood but a power that walked where men could not follow" (Clark 101).

Ozidi's tried-and-true methods - brawn, aggression - are no good. The clash compels an acknowledgment of limitations beyond human prowess. The implicit challenge of the Smallpox King is stark: "There are things which do not yield to force and men who forget this are broken" (Clark 104). It summarizes the philosophical core of the play. Violence does not apply everywhere; it encounters thresholds beyond which it will destroy itself. Ozidi's eventual withdrawal reflects partial recognition: "And there his hand fell down, and for a change the spear was not up again" (Clark 110). This moment is one not of triumph, but of restraint. It is the first time that Ozidi's action is marked by suspension instead of continuation. Scholarly conjectures that this interaction serves a restorative purpose. As communal mechanisms are unable to bring Ozidi under control, cosmic forces dictate restrictions.

Abnegation and the Remains of Violence

Ozidi Saga refuses the common heroic closure. Ozidi does not restore; he renounces violence: "He put aside the weapons, and there was land that had long been troubled that began to breathe again" (Clark 118). This renunciatory gesture is important but it is not enough. It brings an end to the cycle of violence, not effects. The community pulls through, but Ozidi's identity has transformed irreversibly. Clark reinforces this ambiguity: "What had been done was not to be undone, but the hand that did it now lay still" (Clark 119). This coda emphasizes the persistence of moral consequence. Ozidi lives on, but his heroism does not.

A close reading of *Ozidi Saga*, demonstrates that heroism is hazardous and unstable in African cultural logic. Ozidi's evolution from avenger to tyrant demonstrates the perils of untrammelled power and the fragility of moral legitimacy. At its essence, however, Ozidi's tale is not a revenge

mission; it is about the moral limits placing constraints on human behavior. It's not that he fought; it's that he does not know when to stop fighting.

Oral Tradition and Performative Aesthetics: The Influence

Arguably its most unique characteristic, however, is its strong connection to Ijaw oral tradition. Clark's version is not only the setting down of an oral account as drama on a page but also a preservation and reinvigoration of the performative nature of the original epic. It was through this combination of orature and contemporary theatre that the structure of both the play and Ozidi's character are to be properly understood.

African orature itself is exactly performance, a free-flowing body of narration to be enlivened with music, dance and audience participation. Contemporary scholarship on African oral traditions similarly emphasizes that orature should be understood not merely as verbal art but as a performative and communal cultural system shaped through dramatization, ritual participation and collective interpretation (Adotevi 278; Mrowinska 101). As Ruth Finnegan points out, oral literature in Africa is "not just a text but an event," located within a particular social and cultural context (Finnegan 21). Springing mainly from the performative aspect of *Ozidi Saga* is its use of chants, songs and ritualized actions that follow the narrative along. These are not just decorative elements; they actively shape the meaning of the story. Thus, Agogbuo and Nwachukwu observes that "the aesthetic structure of Ozidi derives its power from the fusion of ritual, proverb, music, dance and oral narration, all of which reinforce the philosophical and moral tensions embedded in the epic tradition" (57).

The narrator and chorus roles are especially prominent. Such that, where the narrator in many Western dramatic traditions plays a dominantly descriptive role, the narrator operates as a mediator between action and audience. He comments, interprets and at times critiques Ozidi's deeds. It's a multi-vocal narrative structure, and meaning is negotiated rather than fixed. Karin Barber's idea of "text as performance" proved particularly useful in this context. She makes the case that African narratives resist singular interpretation because they exist in a web of social voices (Barber 89). In this sense, Ozidi's identity is not seen so much in what he has done but what people will finally draw from his act from the community. By praising and then expressing as the songs; addressing the protagonist, the chorus captures how audience members' feelings about him change over the course of the play.

In addition, the play's ritualistic aspects support its thematic preoccupations. Wole Soyinka's conception of the "ritual archetype" operates on the cause that African drama is always considered within a metaphysical sphere linking human and spiritual (Soyinka 141). In *Ozidi Saga*, this link is reflected in the frequent invocation of supernatural powers and a cyclical structure. Ozidi's fights are not just physical clashes; they are symbolic performances of cosmic order and disorder.

This dynamic is further illuminated with Richard Schechner's performance theory. Schechner suggests that performance represents a site of change where cultural meanings are produced and negotiated (36). *Ozidi Saga* illustrates that in a performative structure, whereby audiences experience not only Ozidi's doings but also their reverberations. The tonal turn, from celebratory to ominous, is a slow-motion critique in performance of his excesses. Crucially, the oral tradition also puts communal judgment front and center. Whereas written literature privileges individual

interpretation, oral performance is always collective. The audience assesses the hero in real time by reacting to his deeds. This participatory dynamic reinforces the notion that heroism is not an inherent quality but a socially constructed and fluidly negotiated status. Clark's preservation of these oral and performative elements is not just aesthetic but ideological. It enables him to challenge the idea of absolute heroism by placing it in a communal context, where moral standards must be agreed upon and based on response. Ozidi's metamorphosis, thus, represents not just a plot twist but rather an actuated process of inscription, made visible by the variance in reactions among the narrator, chorus and implied audience.

Power and Corruption in Postcolonial Terms

Ozidi's degeneration from a revered avenger to a dreaded tyrant can productively be read in the context of postcolonial discourse. Although it is based in Ijaw oral tradition, J. P. Clark's *Ozidi Saga* moves beyond its mythic origins and focuses instead on the everyday socio-political realities of a post-independence Africa. In particular, the play echoes a paradox noted by postcolonial theorists: that liberators can become oppressors. One foundational framework for this interpretation is Frantz Fanon's seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon claims that the nationalist elite, once in a position of power after colonisation, often replicated the same systems of oppression they fought against (Fanon 149). This cycle of suppression is motivated by a lackluster acceptance of power, moral limitation, or responsibility. Ozidi's trajectory mirrors this dynamic. Recent analyses of postcolonial Nigerian performative politics similarly reveal how power, once celebrated as liberatory, frequently reproduces structures of intimidation and symbolic violence within the public sphere. At first, his violence is focused toward a righteous cause; avenging his father's wrongful death. But as his campaign grows, it loses that clarity and devolves into ungratifying indiscriminate attack.

This degeneration is presumably what I would call the corruption of moral purpose as a result of moral limitation. Ozidi did not choose tyranny; he grows into it as a result of a failure to control his power. His transformation is slow, even subtle at first, which makes it all the more unnerving. There's no sudden heel-face turn: the hero doesn't just decide to become a villain, he rules himself into villainy through unbridled agency.

Ngũgĩ waThiong'o's critique of postcolonial African societies sheds even more light on this process. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ argues that political freedom alone is insufficient to eradicate the psychological and systemic legacies left behind by colonialism (Ngũgĩ 29). This results in new leaders recreating oppressive systems in the name of sovereignty. Ozidi's actions can be seen as symbolic of this phenomenon. His first quest for justice becomes caught in a logic of domination, where violence is repeated not as an end to achieve but as a mode of being.

The Trouble with Nigeria by Chinua Achebe provides a very complementary line of thought to this reading. Achebe ascribes the failures of postcolonial governance to a leadership crisis, characterized by a void in moral integrity and accountability (Achebe 1). Ozidi embodies this crisis. Although he initially embodies the ideal of hope, his excessive ambition estranges him from the community that needs saving.

In this context the Yoruba proverb *afi fila perinojokan lo n yimo* (English translation) is especially instructive. It highlights the fleeting nature of power acquired through extraordinary but unsustainable deeds. Ozidi's initial successes win him respect, but a growing dependence on violence undermines this goodwill. The community moves from treating this authority with reverence to treating it with fear, which reflects the instability of authority that is not based on ethical legitimacy.

Also, the play is a reflection of wider concerns with leadership in a post-independence Africa. The initial euphoria of liberation soon dissipates into disillusionment when the tribal leaders do not deliver what their people expected. Ozidi's descent encapsulates this disillusionment. His tale serves as a cautionary tale of the perils of confusing power with justice. Clark's critique manages to be both subtle and profound. By placing his political concerns in this mythological narrative, he avoids didacticism while nonetheless providing a potent commentary on leadership. Ozidi isn't just a character but an allegorical figure; her rise and fall mirror the wider arc of postcolonial African states.

Moral Ambiguity and the Tragic Hero

Perhaps one of the strongest elements of *Ozidi Saga* is its eschewal of a simple good/evil dichotomy. Instead, Clark develops a morally fraught protagonist whose choices resist easy labeling. Ozidi is not all hero or all villain; he inhabits a liminal space where virtue and vice intersect. This ambiguity corresponds with the Aristotelian idea of the tragic hero. As noted above, tragedy stems not from moral depravity but rather mistakes in judgment (hamartia) (Aristotle 54). Ozidi's tragedy is that he cannot tell justice from vengeance. The desire for revenge against his father consumes him, rendering him incapable of imagining the wider repercussions of his actions.

This interpretation is deepened by Arthur Miller's foray into tragic theory. Miller argues that tragedy is based on the struggle of the individual to maintain dignity before all powerful forces acting against him (Miller 4). Similarly, through Ozidi's relentless pursuit of vengeance can be interpreted as an attempt to bring order and control to a world driven by injustice. But this statement ultimately becomes his undoing. However, in an African setting, the communal aspect of tragedy is very important. As Okpewho stresses, the hero's actions are always measured against her or his impact on the community (Okpewho 80). Therein lies Ozidi's tragedy, which is not just personal but collective. His turn to violence shatters social harmony, requiring ritual cleansing to bring balance back.

Clark deepens this sense of the communal through the play's performative structure. The narrator and chorus also act as moral commentators, guiding how audiences interpret what transpires. Their changing note—of violence and hope is an echo of the gaze now trained on Ozidi's deeds. This polyphony underscores the instability of moral judgment, complicating any attempt to define heroism in clean absolutes.

Ozidi's eventual listing with the Smallpox King is thus also one moment of potential reckoning. This encounter hints at the potential for some measure of restraint and redemption. The resolution, however, is not triumphant but muted. Ozidi gives up his sword, a sign of withdrawal from violence not the restoration of heroic stature. The focus moves from winning to surviving, from

conquest to containment. I think this ending is tremendously important. It rejects the usual narrative closure of heroism, where protagonist's victory is unambiguous and celebrated. In response, Clark provides a less simplistic, and more costly (in every sense) conclusion. Ozidi survives, but his legacy changes forever. He's still not the hero he used to be, and he hasn't exactly been redeemed.

This moral ambiguity recontextualises the *Ozidi Saga* as more than a straightforward oral epic retold. It turns the story into a philosophical exploration of power, fairness, and fallibility. The result may tend toward pulpy genre - this is an adventure story, after all - but by offering up a protagonist who is both admirable, Clark asks us to grapple in real terms with the very idea of heroism.

Conclusion

J. P. Clark's *Ozidi Saga* provides a robust, complex exploration of heroism, power and moral ambiguity. Through Ozidi, the play examines the thin line that separates valor from violence; it shows how easily one can fold into another. What starts out as a tale of justified revenge slowly develops into a cautionary tale about excess and the corruption that accompanies unrestrained power. Referencing Ijaw oral tradition and incorporating aspects of ritual performance, Clark has composed a culturally specific yet universally resonant work.

The play thus embodies a spirit of decolonization, not only preserving indigenous oral forms but also reimagining them to respond to contemporary issues most notably the crisis of leadership in postcolonial Africa. Thus, this analysis has shown how Ozidi end up becoming the recipient of all its medication memes, as his transition from regular hero to antisocial killer is not undue. Rather it is an expected outcome of his unbridled desire for revenge over the event that transpired in his life. His trajectory has the shape of the Aristotelian tragic arc, in which greatness carries within it the seeds of ruin. Simultaneously, this play engages with postcolonial critiques of power to demonstrate how liberators can turn into oppressors when there is a failure of moderation.

The Yoruba proverb *afi fila perinojokan lo n yimo* (*English translation*) holds the departmental argument of this study: extraordinary achievements only result in temporary visibility when not borne on the shoulders of ethical responsibility. Ozidi's initial bravery earns him admiration, but his later offense erodes this legacy into a figure who is both feared and pitied. The play is thus still with us, and in the act of bringing us closer to it, reminds us that power and morality have always had such their fraught relationship.

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