

THE MARRIAGE OF OFO-NA-OGU AND PSALM 109 IN THE COMPLEX DYNAMICS OF IGBO LITIGATION

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Abstract

This paper examines the connection between Psalm 109 and *Ofo-na-Ogu* in the complex dynamics of litigation. The focus is to bring to the fore how awareness of the litigatory implications of Psalm 109 and *Ofo-na-Ogu* can serve as instrument to bring about Socio – ethical transformation that in turn will pave way for peaceful coexistence, cohesion, love brotherhood and justice. In the face of the current realities in Nigeria, where people are being mowed down because they are powerless, where sanctity of human life is no longer guaranteed, where politicians and those in authority think they can subjugate, dehumanize and/or tyrannize the people and go away with it, the need to look at this psalm in the genre of litigation, as one that pleads for ethical behaviour, justice, protection and vindication of truth, justice and innocence becomes imperative. Against this background, the current research adopts rhetorical and phenomenological approaches to explore and study the concept validity of every relevant dimension of the subject under consideration. The work notes that so much depends on understanding the implications of unethical behaviour. The paper recommends amongst other things that ethical teachings of the scripture as well as understanding the denotative and connotative meaning of *igoOfonaijuOgu* will help greatly to deal with “*man's inhumanity to man*” as well as other vices that have bedevilled every façade of Nigerian society.

Introduction

Ofo and Ogu relate to Igbo judicial system. They are systems of complex correlation between justice and innocence in which innocence dictates the side of justice and then reflects the dynamic relation between *Ofo and Ogu*. *Ofo* represents ancestral authority, sacred tradition and community. *Ofo* enforces justice, while *Ogu* ascertains the innocence of the individual and determines whose side justice takes. The judicial system is based on the traditional moral code, which is considered to be sacred tradition. The ancestral power to dispense justice is determined by innocence (*Ogu*) and judgment (*Ofo*), and they operate in the form of punishing the guilty and vindicating the innocent.

In the dispensation of justice through judgment, no being, divine or human, is believed to apply the force of *Ofo* against someone without recourse to *Ogu*. This is expressed in sayings like: *OfojiOgu* or *OgujiOfo*, which means ‘justice acts with *Ogu*’ and ‘*Ogu* (innocence) controls *Ofo* (justice) respectively. When the punitive force of *Ofo* is expected to fall on a person and it does not then that person is likely to tell people that *OgujiOfo*, that is, his/her innocence has prevented the punitive force of *Ofo* from falling on him/her. This invariably proves his/her case because it is believed that “*Ofona-egbuji, Ofona-egbuede, maOguna-egbuOfo*” (literarily meaning, ‘*Ofo* can kill the yam as well as the cocoyam, but only *Ogu* [innocence] is able to kill *Ofo* [justice] and *Mmeregini* [what have I done?] buisiOgu).

Metuh (1998) sees *Mmeregini* as a form of *ijuIgu*. Hesees *Mmeregini* as the highest *Ogu*. This could be said to be true especially when one considers the denotative as well as the connotative meaning of *Mmeregini*, from the standpoint of its interpretation as “*I am innocent “or as a question, “what is my misdemeanour”?*”

Igbo axiom says: Ogu dikaokpukpuanu, ma o chaghinzu o gaghiahupu, (meaning, ‘*Ogu* is like a bone whose hardness cannot be punctured unless it turns into dust or gets pulverised’). *Ogu* is the shield that protects the innocent and the upright from unjust castigations and transgressions, and gives them the right as well as the authority to invoke the force of *Ofo* to act in his defence and punish his castigators and transgressors. This force cannot be mobilised effectively by the guilty. The ‘*turning to dust*’ of bone (*Ogu*) is a proverbial expression of loss of integrity through a covert or even breach of traditional laws and prohibitions protecting the interests and welfare of the human persons and life, and the overall welfare of the society. When this is the case, the force of innocence (*Ogu*) of the individual is punctured and negated, leaving him vulnerable to the force of *Ofo* as well as the evil machinations of malevolent spirits and persons.

The material symbolisation of *Ogu* is almost always the exposure of palms of the person doing the *ijuOgu*. The left palm is the proof of innocence (*Ogu*) and the right palm is of justice (*Ofo*). This exposure or raising up of the palms is the normal symbolic declaration of innocence which implies a claim that the palms are not stained by any evil deed that breaches the law of commensality or the tradition of the group in every distinct case. The palms are believed to bear personal marks of destiny, genius and deeds of thought and action. When therefore the individual exposes his/her palms in claims of innocence, he/she lays bare his/her life story, making it possible for his/her truth-claim of innocence to be verified by his/her true life story as borne by the life marks on his/her palms. He thus stakes the totality of his life, moral worth and destiny. He bears either stained palms or unstained palms: the former indicts and condemns him, while the latter vindicates him in each declaration of innocence (*ijuOgu*). *Ogu* therefore is the truth-value of one’s confessions and it is popularly indicated by the exposure of one’s palms; in this case ‘unstained’ palms.

The value of truth and transparency has a link with Igbo perception of what constitutes evil. The traditional Igbo society has no concept of objective evil. Evil is believed to be in every individual as a tendency. This belief is encapsulated in the saying: *madubunjoala* (human beings are responsible for the evils in the society). According to Metuh (1998):

For *Ndilgbo*, evil is present and is felt in the human society through the action of individuals. However, the traditional Igbo socio-moral space in which *Ogu* sustains the ideal of mutual responsiveness was ruptured by the colonial

enterprise and by Christianity, which located evil outside humans as morally responsible agents and there are anti-social *Ofo* types such as: “*Ofo-atu, Ofoanunu-ebe and Ofontigbuntigbu*. These are used in killing and unleashing evil by sorcerers, charm makers and evil-minded individuals” (p.51).

Whether the agent of depravity is objectified in 'Satan' or 'Devil', the consequence is that the contemporary Igbo society is transformed into a liminal space in which the violent extremes of malevolent spirits and persons enjoy a lucid day. Measures of control became committed to "uncontrolled individuals" in government establishments and to abstract judicial reward structures of heaven and hell.

Based on the supreme value of life safeguarded by the values of freedom and truth, the task of living, for the Igbo, is conceived as a protracted affirmation of one's uprightness and innocence in the “*open glare*” of the community comprised of divinities, spirits and humans. This is somewhat ferocious, but it is an acceptable violence by consensus of individual integrators (which may be persons, families, clans. etc.), rather than the intrusive violence of some totalitarian or despotic aggressors. Through the consensus violence of transparency the individual is protected from him/herself, from the others group and from capricious spiritual forces. The protection of the individual in this sense is as well the protection of the group and the environment.

In the writings of most Igbo scholars, *igoOfonaijuOgu* are not properly distinguished. According to Onyeocha (2002), every *igoOfo* involves *ijuOgu* but not every *ijuOgu* involves *igoOfo*. *IgoOfo* means “blessing or cursing (as the case may be) with the *Ofo*, a cult staff. In the *igoOfo* ritual, the blessing and the cursing takes the form of *ijuOgu*. This ritual is almost always associated with the early Morning Prayer by the head of the family. By virtue of his position and the authority of the family *Ofo*, the ritual performed by the head of the family on waking up each morning is known as *igoOfo*, however, the “solemn utterances he subsequently makes, the ideals and principles of the good life he invokes are called *Ogu*. The action of invocation itself is referred to as *iju-Ogu*”. Put simply, *IgoOfoisIjuOgu* through the authority of *Ofo*.

Okere (1997) lists *igoOfo* as one of the traditional rituals through which one can know the worship of God in Igbo land. This is because it is a ritual that enshrines good living as the proper way of worshipping God. Here Okere contradicts Arinze’s view that though the Igbo hold *Chi-ukwu* in highest regard among other deities, their commitment to good living has nothing to do with *Chi-ukwu* (Arinze, 1970).

Iju-Ogu as a separate ritual refers to the act of pleading one’s case in what can be described as “*Ogu projection*’ or ‘*Ogu broadcast*’. In Igbo traditional litigation, the litigants are always required to perform in turns the ritual of *ifoOfo and/or ijuOgu*. The *igoOfo* takes the form of plea for justice and the *ijuOgu* takes the form of case presentation and defence. It involves declarations of innocence and integrity in the face of opposition, calumny, accusation, or misunderstanding, or undeserved suffering that are always well articulated in the broadcast.

IjuOgu is further distinguished from *igoOfo* by the fact that while only *Ofo* holders may perform the *igoOfo*, any one irrespective of age, gender or race may perform the *ijuOgu* whether publicly or privately. By the way, while *igoOfo* is the authority of all beings, *iku-Ofo* is a ritual that sanctifies an act with the authority of *Ofo*. For instance: a communal decision becomes binding (law of the land) only after the “*aka-ji-ofos*” (*Ofo* title holders) have sanctioned it by knocking the *Ofo* on the ground, hence *Iku-Ofo*.

When the *Ofo* title holders agree on a matter, the ancestors who act legitimately as retributors of moral wrongdoing are invoked in *ijuOgu*. It is only the authority of the ultimate retributor of moral wrongdoing (*Chi-ukwu*) that is invoked with no reference to the ancestors. *Ofo* and *igoOfo* pertain to the traditional institutions of family, clan, social stratification, etc., while *Ogu* and *ijuOgu* pertain to the moral vocation as well as the moral authority of the individual. To adhere to the moral vocation of *Ogu* is *ijiOgu* - that is, to have *Ogu*; that is to be innocent of morally reprehensible acts. When this is the case, *Ogu* becomes the moral authority of the individual who has it.

Before one performs the action of *ijuOgu*, especially the double handed *ijuOgu* the one must be sure that he lives a good life and truthfully exonerates himself from the reprehensible acts that the one may recount in *ijuOgu*. In situations of grave danger to life as indeed in all situations, the main condition for *ijuOgu* is innocence because “*mmeregini buisi Ogu*” (innocence is the ground for *Ogu*/justice).

The three constituents of religio-cultural philosophies of the Igbo person are:

- i. *Ofo*
- ii. *Ogu*
- iii. *Mmere-gini*.

The individual makes an examination of conscience. After that, if he feels he is innocent, he can then proceed with *ijuOgu* with the caution, *Ogugizikwaezi* (let what you say be true) and that *Okukotuhie, oluahiriya* (falsehood has serious repercussions). The ritual is symbolised by the exposure of hands for the invisible retributors of moral wrongdoing to see whether the individual is innocent or not.

As different from, but not excluding the daily morning prayer, the prayer of *ijuOgu* arises from specific situations of proximate danger in the struggle to survive the machinations of evil forces. In every Igbo community there are people who are suspected of working maliciously against their relatives and neighbours, through the use of magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. This is the centre of evil feared and their evil machinations are countered with powerful prayers in the form of *igoOfo* and *ijuOgu*.

According to Mbiti (1970) “*The efficacy of OfonaOgu lie in the shared belief the Igbo people have in them and their appropriation of the moral codes they enforce, as such they have the effect of imposing the load of the breach of the law on the conscience of the offender*” (p 205).

From the above, it is clear that *OfonaOgu* are used in praying and in litigation. In praying, *igoOfo* validates the prayer while *ijuOgu* is the praying or the prayer itself. In litigation, *ijuOgu* is the litigation proper while *Ofo* is the authority for handing down judgment and sanction. It is not every use of *Ofo* that involves prayer. For instance the use of *Ofo* in the sense of *iku-Ofo* or *igo-Ofo* to place sanctions in line with existing binding moral codes in the community. However, *Ogu*, in the sense of *iju-Ogu* almost always refers to prayer and is litigatory both in form and content. It is its genre as prayer (poem or psalm) that relates the *Igbo iju-Ogu*. Such effect on the conscience of the offender may be likened to the case of the writer of Psalm 109 or the case of Judas Iscariot in Matthew 27:3-5 and that of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:3-5; 9-10.

For instance, in the Igbo Morning Prayer, the head of the family, after washing his hands and mouth, and performing other cultic purificatory acts, first greets the supernatural beings in this order; (*Chukwu or Chi-Ukwu (as opposed to chi-nta) [small god]*, spirits and the ancestors). Then he confesses his sins (he in fact confesses his innocence and asks pardon for wrongs he may have committed unintentionally or unconsciously), he asks for blessings for himself and his family. Finally, he prays that people be rewarded and treated

according to their own deeds and thoughts. This is done with the belief that “*ihemmadun'echereibeya, ka Chi-ukwun'echereya*” (as a person plans for others, so God plans for him). It is therefore its genre, form and content (it is essentially a lament in its form and content) that justify our application of it as an interpretative model on Psalm 109.

Psalm 109 as an IgoIfonaljuOgu Text

When read from the perspective of the Igbo, Psalm 109 gives itself away completely as an *igoOfonaijuOgu* (litigatory) prayer text. That is, it is read as a litigatory prayer with form and content typical of case presentation. In order to identify the Igbo Context/Setting of Psalm 109 it is pertinent to know that like the Igbo prayer of *igoOfonaijuOgu*, the entire psalm which is seen as a case presentation is made to/before God who is called and addressed by name in verse 1b. The invocation and address sets the entire presentation in the divine court context. Verses 6-19 constitute the immediate context which caused the psalmist to compose the Psalm. Before analysing the Psalm as an *igoOfonaijuOgu* (litigatory) prayer text to God, let us first analyse the immediate context which is mentioned in verse 2-5 and substantiated in verses 6-19.

Verses 1-19

Without first bringing in the direct speech and quotation theories of scholars, what is seen in verses 6-19 clearly reveals either an impending trial or a desire and an intention to initiate and commence. Under the laws of retribution in the book of Exodus, Exodus 22:7-9 provide that cases be brought before God for determination. In 1 Kings 8 one reads of Solomon’s prayer at dedication of the Temple. He in part enjoins the Lord to hear, judge and act on cases brought before him in the Temple, “*condemning the guilty by bringing their conduct on their own heads, and vindicating the righteous by rewarding them according to their righteousness*” (cf. 1 Kings 8:31-32). Seen rightly in this way, the case is probably between the Community as the prosecutor and the Psalmist as the defendant. The judge(s) and the competent Court of elders appear understood. What is sought and appointed is a prosecution witness (verse 6) for the purposes is establishing the case against the defendant. The witness has a clear task of declaring the defendant guilty no matter the defence put forward (verse 7).

The Charge

The substantive charge is probably murder/verses 16. The accusers most probably accused the psalmist that he committed this offence through habitual cursing that reveal lack of kindness and characteristic show of wickedness. This deals with what is considered the most important value for the Igbo, the value for life. Every discussion of morality is a discussion of moral values and norms of behaviour. In Igbo culture and scale, value for life come first *Ndu-bu-isi* (life is head [first among all other values]). It is the absolute and necessary ground for every other human value and in relation to which every other thing is considered valuable or not. For the Igbo person life is a gift to be cherished because *Ndu di uto* (life is sweet). It is jealously guarded, protected and defended because *Nduadighiabuo* (life has no duplicate). Based on this, every other value is built around the value of life as a safeguard. Most of Igbo norms of behaviour are given in negative formulations. They range from respect or sacredness of life: *egbulammadu*,

(don't kill [a human being], show charity); *emegbulammaduibegi*, (do not cheat your fellow human being); *emegbulaogbenye ma-obunwanyisinkpe*, (do not deal unjustly with the orphan or with the widow, show hospitality); *nabataonyeobia*, (welcome the stranger). To property rights we have: *ezulaoshi or ori*, (do not steal); *ewerela ma obumebieiheonyezon'ike*, (do not take or destroy another person's property by force), and other lots of abominable acts.

According to Osuagwu (2003) quoting Onyeocha (1994):

The moral norms are "*clear and simple to understand*." Their applicability is human oriented and not system oriented; In essence, it requires individual accountability. The individual may deviate from the moral norms and the values the Igbo hold very dearly, but he may neither be able to defend his action within an Igbo community and without carrying Igbo people along. On the other hand, exceptional compliance to them and avoidance of anti-life actions are rewarded with leadership titles of honour and prestige such as *Eze* and *Nze* both of which mean 'avoider of evil' (p. 14)

The main issue in verse 16 is therefore a very serious one both for the community and for the accused person. But the planned conduct of the trial is a bit disturbing:

ha'(j'x)!; (hy<ih.TiAt^aL'pit.W÷ [v'_r" aceäyEAjp.V'ähiB.â

"When he shall be judged, let him be condemned, and let his prayers become sin" (verse 7).

This verse makes it clear that the Civil Law proceedings was between the State and the defendant. In present day jurisprudence, murder cases are under penal law and are prosecuted by the state. So the prosecutor is probably a state prosecutor or an agent of the state.

However, because all seems to be only fragmentary elements of juridical activity in the bible, without introducing foreign elements into the text, the researcher carried out the analysis borrowing from the terminology of modern day jurisprudence. Within the context of the covenant community (here referred to as the State) the charge, the evidence and the consequences are all based on Covenant Law. Arraignment is set completely against the defendant without the least hope of a fair hearing.

The imperative tone of the verse sets it out as a vindictive plot. More disturbing are the prayers and desired outcome of the trial for the accused. These, as is in verses 8-15 and 17-19, are interpreted as terrible curses which made Psalm 109 to be classified not just as a 'Cursing Psalm' (imprecatory Psalm), but as the worst cursing psalm. It is the moral issue that arises from the unjustifiability of these curses that has led to the investigation of who is the speaker in verses 6-19. It is either the psalmist (the direct speech theory) or the psalmist's enemy (the quotation theory). Our position on this will be argued when we relate verses 6 – 19 to the whole Psalm as an *igoOfonaijuOgu* prayer text to God.

Authenticating Psalm 109 as an IgoOfonaijuOgu Prayer Text to God

Like in the traditional Igbo *igoOfonaijuOgu* prayer, the psalmist in Psalm 109 addresses and appeals to (*Chi-ukwu*) God who is his addressee and likely also his audience. Typical of *ijuOgu* also in the case presentation format the psalmist presents the case as between himself (the complainant/appellant) and the enemies (the defendants).

Address before the Divine Court

Verse lb `vr:(x/T,-la;(
 yti^aL'hit.÷ yheíl{a/
Verse lb O God, of my praise, hold not your peace.

The Charge (verses 2-5)

`rq,v'(!Avål. yTi^aai÷ WriB.DIWxt' _P' yl;äl' hm'r>miâ-ypiW* [v'ḫr" ypiçyKiÛ
 ynIWb+b's. ha'ân>fi yrEäb.dlw>

- 2. for the mouth and the wicked and the mouth of the deceitful are opened against me; they have spoken against me with lying tongues.
- 3a. also with words of hatred they compassed me about;

The proximate cause of the application is what the psalmist narrates from verse 2 all through to verse 19. What he says in verse 2 summarises it all

`rq,v'(!Avål. yTi^aai÷ WriB.DI
 “They have spoken against me with lying tongues”

(-ypi “mouth of” -ypiW “and mouth of” Wxt' _P' “[they] are opened”). The psalmist contrasts, by way of inclusion with verse 30, the maligning mouth of the wicked with his own mouth singing God’s praises.

`rq,v'(!Avål. yTi^aai÷ WriB.DI Verse 2c
 “They have spoken against me with lying tongues”

□ □ □ □ □□(lying) probably has a legal connotation of giving false evidence. This is clear from its use in Exodus 20:16 and in Proverbs 6:19 to refer to false witness. They are scheming to effect the ruin of the psalmist by groundless charges supported by false witness.

Bovati (1994) paid good attention to the issue of silence in legal proceedings. He sees it as the duty of the magistrate not to keep silent. Keeping silence on the side of the magistrate means refusal to judge as well as to save, while not keeping silence means judging and saving. The latter is often requested of the judge by the accused. In the case here, the accused person, the psalmist, addresses the divine judge and requests him not to keep silent but to bring about right judgement and save him.

This verse (lb) focuses on the audience/addressee (God) in the form of what Hogan (2002) calls “the flattery of the judge or jury” (p.73). The accusations against the psalmist that he caused the death of a poor person by means of magically effective curses (vs. 16-19) are here dismissed by the psalmist as false. Such use of the tongue is noticed in John 18:18: “Come and let us smite him with the tongue, let us denounce him” said Jeremiah’s opponents.

Osuagwu (2003) demonstrated truth and falsehood as principles of order and disorder respectively. His demonstration leads one to assert that the Igbo traditional society, as a truth-telling society, is a highly ordered society which also through the rite of *igoOfonaijuOgu* enhances the tendency of its members to tell the truth. Lie is an

instrument of unpredictability. He said: “*The greater the tendency to lie in a society, the greater will be the social disorder. The greater the social disorder, the greater will be the tendency to lie*” (p. 21).

Lie as an instrument of unpredictability, is often difficult to detect. This is all the more difficult in a society that accommodates plurality of views and opinion. In Igbo traditional society therefore, *igoOfonaljuOgu* are not only effective means of detecting lies, but also requiring truth as the societal expectation. Its form as prayer to *Chi-ukwu* (or *Chukwu*) is particularly significant. This significance is played out in the word *Chi-ukwu* itself when linguistically analysed. It is a contraction of two words “*chi*” and “*ukwu*” (loosely translated as big God as opposed to smaller household deities). The word which is a compound noun is sometimes written as *Chukwu*. The noun *Chi* is derived from the verb *ichi*, which means ‘to hold together’, ‘to rule’, ‘to arrange’, ‘to order’, and ‘to organize’. The noun *Chi* may therefore mean ‘binder’, ‘ruler’, ‘arranger’, ‘orderer’ and ‘organizer’.

The word *ukwu* is an adjective and means ‘big’, ‘great’, ‘mighty’. So *Chi-ukwu* means ‘the big, great or mighty ruler or orderer’ who is the “source of cosmic ordering and order”. The significance is thus played out in and through the prayer of *igoOfonaijuOgu*. In this petition, *Chi-ukwu* is invited to restore order by vindicating truth and implementing justice. Psalm 109 fits perfectly into this picture. It presents the response or reaction of an individual who finds himself in a human social interactive space in which his life is seriously threatened.

Defence

`~N")xiynIWmïx|L'YI)w:
`hL'(pit. ynlia|w: ynIWn@j.f.yIytüb'h|a;-tx;T:(
`yti(b'h|a; tx;T;äha"n>fiw>÷ hb'_Ajtx;T;ä h[r"ây|ä|' WmyfiÜY"-w:

- 3b *They fought against me without cause;*
- 4. *For my love they are my adversaries; but I give myself unto prayer.*
- 5. *And they have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love.*

Weighed down by the false accusations of his enemies, the psalmist opens his defence with a declaration of innocence with (without cause) in verse 3b. This is *OfonOgu* and is the ground for *igoOfonaijuOgu.MmereginibuisiOgu*. Since the psalmist understands in the spirit of *igoOfonaijuOgu* that, “*he who comes to equity must come with clear hands*”, he is not just without any offence against those who attack him; he is full of good actions for them (vs. 4). His prayers are proofs of his love for them. It is good deed and is a sign of his friendship (verse 5). With these he emphasises his righteousness and pleads his faithfulness to the covenant. In the context of the psalms this confession of innocence refers only to the false accusations of his adversaries. It does not mean absolute guiltless in general since no one is without sin (Psalm 143:2b). It has a particular purpose – that of destroying unfounded suspicions. In the context of *igoOfonaijuOgu* however, this may not exclude guiltlessness (especially on the ground for the petition) since *igoOfonaijuOgu* in most cases requires complete absence of wrongdoing.

Issues for Determination

- i. **Allegation of Accusation by the Enemy (vs. 2bc, 4a)**
WriB.DIWxt'_P' yl;ä|' hm'r>miâ-ypiW

ṛq,v'(!Avål. yTi³ai÷
ynIWn©j.f.yIytiüb'h]a;-tx;T;(

- 2bc *And the mouths of the wicked are opened against me;
They have spoken against me with lying tongues.*
4a *for my love they are my adversaries*

ii. **Allegation of Falsehood of the Enemy (vs. 2ac)**

ṛq,v'(!Avål. yTi³ai÷ WriB.DI
yl;äl' hm'r>miâ-iW* [v'‡r"içyKiÛ

- 2ac *Forwicked and deceitful men
Have spoken against me with lying tongues.*

iii. **Allegation of Wickedness of the Enemy (vs. 2a, 3, 5)**

ṛq,v'(!Avål. yTi³ai÷ WriB.DI
~N")xiynIWmïx|L'YI)w: ynIWb+b's. ha'ân>fi yrEäb.dIw>
`yti(b'h]a; tx;T;äha"n>fiw>÷ hb' _Ajtx;T;ä h['r"ây]l;äl' WmyfiÛY"-w:

- 2a. *Forwicked and deceitful men*
3. *With words of hatred they surround me;
They attack me without cause.*
5. *They repay me evil for good,
And hatred for my friendship.*

Specification/Substantiation of the Charges

After the opening address to and invocation of *Chi-ukwu, igoOfonaiju-Oguin* the case presentation format proceeds to state or mention the issues(s) at stake. He then exonerates himself by the declaration of innocence, which is the *Ogu* proper. He describes what his enemy is wishing and planning against him in spite of his innocence. He prays that such wishes and plans turn back on their protagonists. Lastly he prays that things turn out good for himself: good health, long life, prosperity etc. as reward and vindication of his innocence. So having stated his case, the psalmist proceeds to bring his proof. What now follows is his substantiation of the allegations stated above.

i. **Allegation of Accusation by the Enemy**

!Ayb.a,w>â ynIä[-vyai @Do‡r>YIw: ds,x'itAfä]] érk;z" al{i Yrv<Üa] !;
`tte(Aml. bb'ilehae'k.nIw>
hk"r"b.Bi÷ #peix'-al{w>) Whae _AbT.w: hl'l'q.âbh;äa/Y<
`hl'l'q.vB;îl.YIw:

- a) *Evidence (vs. 16, 17a,c, 18a)*
16. *For he never thought of doing kindness,
But persecuted to death the poor
And the needy and the broken-hearted.*
17a. *As he loved to pronounce curse*
17c. *He found no pleasure in blessing*
18a. *As he clothed himself with cursing.*

Here, verse. 16 constitutes the substantive charge/accusation while verse 17ac, 18a are given proof (instrumental evidence) for the accusation in terms of means. Verse 16 is

related to verse 17a, c, and 18a as result is related to action and effect to cause. Elements of cursing are almost always present in Igbo traditional prayers. “*Egbebereugobere, nkesiriibeyaebela, nkukwaya*”. However, they are always in the form of wishing others what you wish yourself and receiving the measure you give out to others. In this sense it basically seeks equity and justice in human affairs and the maintenance of the moral order.

ii. **Relevant Exhibit(s) (verses 16-19)**

ᵛAn*yimiy>-l]; dmoĩ[]y: !j'af'w>÷

6. *And let Satan (an accuser) stand at his right hand*

This is the appointment of an accuser, probably a prosecution witness, who will formally bring up the charges and accusations against the psalmist before the community.

iii. **Allegation of Falsehood of the Enemy**

hk'ar"b.Bi÷
#peix'-al{w>)
Whae_AbT.w:
hl'l'q.âbh;âa/Y
<
ᵛhl'al'q.vB;il.YI
w:

a. **Evidence (vs. 17a,c, 18a)**

- 17a. *He loved to pronounce a curse*
- 17c. *He found no pleasure in blessing*
- 18a. *He wore cursing as his garment.*

The allegation of false accusation in verse 2 is here substantiated. The Psalmist mentions the actions or deeds, which the enemies charge him with directly. What follows is his contestation of them.

iv. **Relevant Exhibit(s) (verse 4b, 7a)**

ᵛhL'(pit. ynlia]w:
ᵛ[ᵛ_r" aceäyEAjp.V'âhiB.â

- 4b. *But I give myself unto prayer.*
- 7a. *When he shall be judged, let him be condemned*

Contrary to the allegation of cursing, the psalmist describes himself as a man of prayer – one to whom praying has become a habit. From the point of view of habit, the psalmist’s description of himself agrees with his enemies’ description of him; they differ only on the object (the what) of the habit. The difference borders on interpretation. For the enemies, the object is curse. Though in verse 7b they acknowledged that he prays, in verse 17a, c, 18a they probably specify that when he prays he curses or that his prayer is cursing. This allegation can be made against almost all forms of traditional Igbo prayer in their demand for justice in the form of good to the good and bad to the bad.

This is no doubt uncomfortable for morally reprehensible individuals. However, the psalmist states the object of his habit as prayer and goes further to qualify the prayer as deriving from his good nature (verse 5) and his love/friendship (verse 4). This also applies to the Igbo prayer of *igoOfonaijuOgu*. At prayer, the Igbo presents himself as an avoicer of wrongdoing, a maintainer of the moral order and one who upholds the principle of live

and let live. So the Igbo person at prayer is a friend to his neighbour and a friend to his community.

Therefore in the Igbo parlance what is prayer? It is good words (benediction for the good and not against him). It is curse (bad words, maledictions against) for his enemies. Thus he dislodges the action or deed alleged of him as a false interpretation and misinterpretation of his virtuous act. Having dislodged the grounds on which the substantive accusation is based, he proves that the accusation made against him has no basis *~N''xiynIWmíx|L'YI)w>*:(*And they attack him without cause verse 3b*).

In the view of this researcher, Igbo traditional prayers, especially when they are prayers as in the case of *igoOfom'obuiju-Ogu*, are prayers for justice, protection and vindication. This is also the case in Psalm 109. To see them as cursing prayers is to misunderstand the real disposition of the "prayer". If the alleged dead person died as a result of the prayer of the psalmist, then his death is better seen as justice taking its course. The justice prayed for in *igoOfonaiju-Ogu* is not a justice that must necessarily end in the guilty paying the supreme penalty, it is one that allows for repentance, reconciliation and restoration of the moral order through honest acknowledgement of deed on the part of the guilty.

One pays the supreme penalty only when one is actually guilty of the issues at stake and fails to acknowledge it and goes ahead to perform a false *Ofo* or *Ogu* broadcast (*igoOfo broadcasting shows one's uprightness and ijuOgu broadcast shows one's innocence*). When this happens the force of justice has been mobilised and set in motion.

Allegation of Wickedness of the Enemy

i. Evidence (vs. 7 and 6)

[v'_r'' aceäyEAjp.V'ähiB
 `ha'(j'x|l;(hy<ih.TiAt'L'pit.W÷.â
 [v'_r'' wyl'äl' dqEâp.h;
 `An*yimiy>-l|; dmoï|y: !j'a'f'w>÷

- 7. *When he is tried, let him be found guilty,
 And may his prayer be counted against him.*
- 6. *Appoint an wicked man to oppose him;
 Let an accuser stand at his right hand.*

As proof of the wickedness of his enemies, the psalmist exposes how the whole plot is set against him. The order is that he be found guilty no matter his defence and plea. Even his good actions are to be considered illegal and accounted against him (verse 7). To guarantee his condemnation, his enemies direct to be appointed one of their kinds as witness. The act of setting an accuser at his right hand (verse 6) is itself an act of wickedness and conspiracy.

With this, the psalmist has successfully used verses 1-19 to substantiate the allegation he makes in verses 2-5. If verses 6-19 are interpreted as cursing then the psalmist's prayer against cursing is understood as a vindictive expression of bad wishes. Therefore, he is therefore not the one cursing but his enemies. His own prayer is for divine justice, protection and vindication as he prays in verses 20-21.

ii. Prayer (verses 20 – 21)

hw''+hy>taeämeyn:j.foâtL;ä|uP. tazOÝ
 `yvi(p.n:-l|; [r''÷~yr|ib.Doh;w>
 ^m<+v. !|;m;äl. yTiaiâ-hfe|] yn''©doa| hwIÜh<y>ÿhT'Ûa;w

yTik.l' _h/n<AtðAjn>Ki-lceK
 `hB,(r>a;K'(yTir>|;ª;n>nI÷.
 ~AC+miWlâv.K' yK;r>Biâ
 `!m,V'(mi vx;iK' yrIªfb.W÷
 ~h,_l' hP'är>x, ytiyyIâh' ÝynIÛa
 `~v'(aro !W[ÿynly>ynIWa'r>yI÷]

- 23. *Like the shadow when it declined, I am gone;
I am shaken off like a locust.*
- 24. *My knees are weak through fasting;
My body is thin and gaunt.*
- 25. *I also became a reproach unto them;
When they look upon me, they shake their heads.*

This time it portrays the psalmist’s pitiable state, in which he feels his physical and spiritual energies dissipated on account of the agitation of his mind and sorrows that consume him. He says of himself: “fade away like evening shadow” (verse 23a). Like a shadow when it declines or is stretched out towards evening, and is about to disappear altogether, so he is made to depart.

The verb “fade” implies compulsion from without. The point of comparison in “shaken off like a locust” (verse 23b) is the helplessness of the locust swept along by the wind (Exodus 10:19; Jeremiah 2:20). In his distress (verse 24b) he has no appetite for food (Psalm 102:4), and like a mourner (2 Samuel 14:2) abstained from the use of oil. With his innocence, spiritual poverty and physical plight, the psalmist is confident that it is actually YHWH (for the Igbo it is *Ogu*) who will stand at his right hand to defend him (verse 31) rather than (wicked person) who had been drafted to stand at his right to accuse him (verse 6).

Renewed Appeal

Verse 26: yh' _l{a/
hw"âhy>ynIrEz>|
`^D<)s.x;k. ynI[EâyviAhâ '

- Verse 26** *Help me, O Lord my God;
O! Save me in accordance with your mercy.*

The threat of the impending plot for his condemnation in the community is real hence the psalmist intensifies his appeal to God. The verse expresses a strong sense of actuality and a strong feeling of personal insecurity. The psalmist is “someone who is subjected to a trial, from which he appeals to God, the supreme judge, for his own acquittal...”

What is Being Sought?

Verse 27

taZO= ^d>y"â-yKi W[d>yEw>â)
 `Ht'(yfi|| hw"âhy>hT'pa;

- Verse 27** *That they may know that this is your hand,
That you, O Lord, have done it.*

The psalmist seeks that truth comes to light. He prays the divine judge to establish that it was not the psalmist that caused the death; rather it was he, God the author of life and dispenser of justice, who took the life of the dead person. The summary of the psalmist’s appeal is the YHWH intervenes with his divine justice and brings things to light. (This) in verse 20 has structural counterpart in verse 27. It relates to the two-sided intervention of

YHWH: here, in verse 27, to vindicate the psalmist and there, in verse 20, to punish his enemies. The punishment will be in the form of reward or wage, which they have earned by their way of life. The use of “work” in vs. 27 is to express YHWH’s dynamic, saving intervention in vs. 21. That is, YHWH has worked the miracle requested in vs. 21 “Work a miracle for me”.

To be Realised Through

Vs. 31

!Ay=b.a, !ymiäylidmo||y:â-yKi(

Av*p.n: yjeip.Vomi [:yvi^oAhl.÷

Vs. 31 *For he stands at the right hand of the poor,
To save his life from those who condemn him.*

The intended unfavourable verdict will turn out favourable to the psalmist because:

- (1) It is God who knows his innocence and who defends the innocent, rather than the wicked one who is out to implicate and accuse him, that will be at his right hand and save him by proving the accusation wrong. Since God is not going to stand physically at his right hand, it could be in the form of guiding the psalmist successfully through any ordeal he may be expected to go through for proof of innocence or guilt. The force of *Ofô* unleashed against him will also be of no avail because of his *Ogu*.
- (2) Since the appointed judge is the one to convict irrespective of defence and prove of innocence, God will act on the judge as he acted on Balaam (Numbers 22-24). He will turn the will of the judge to convert to that of acquittal. The former applies to the Igbo world view the latter applies to the Hebrew world view.

Desired Consequences (verses 28 – 29)

Verse 28a

%rEib'ñt.hT'ça;w>éhM'he-Wil.q:y>

Verse 28a *Let them curse, but you will bless;*

Convinced of his innocence, the psalmist strongly believes that the divine judge will turn curses on him by his enemies into blessing. He has miraculously done this in the past, Numbers 23-24 (cf. Deuteronomy 23: 4-5; Nehemiah 13:2). Balak hired Balaam to curse Israel but God caused Balaam to bless instead. God did this in keeping with his covenant love for Israel. In similar manner the psalmist here looks forward to being blessed in accordance with the covenant love (cf. verses 21-26b).

Verses 28b-29

xm'(f.yI ^iD>b.[;w>) Wvbo^oYEw: YWmq"Ü
~T'(v.B' ly|läm.k; Wjß||y:w>hM' _liK. yn:âj.AfWvâB.l.yI

Verse 28b: *When they attack they will be put to shame, but your servant will rejoice.*

Verse 29: *My accusers will be clothed with disgrace
And wrapped in shame as in a cloak.*

Satisfied with his presentation to God, the psalmist begins to project a verdict to his favour. When the trial commences, his accusers will be proved wrong and, disappointed in their own plans, they will be put to shame and disgraced.

Promise of Gratitude

Verse 30:

ypi_B. daoám. hw"âhy>hd<ÛAa«
`WNI,(l.h;(a] ~yBiär: %Atßb.W

Verse 30: *With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord;*

In the great throng I will praise him.

Having made a good “OfonaOgu broadcast” that will bring favourable verdict, the psalmist anticipates his rejoicing and praising God while his enemies will be ashamed and disgraced. The psalmist contrasts by way of inclusion verse 2 with verse 30, the maligning mouth of the wicked with his own mouth singing God’s praises. The vow of thanksgiving is a manifestation of confidence. It is a promise made in the time of peril to offer thanksgiving sacrifice or proclaim thankfully the saving acts of YHWH in the Temple if the prayer is answered. It is a promise the psalmist will fulfil in the midst of a “great congregation” (verse 30, in the context of a thanksgiving service. With this the psalmist confidently anticipates the resumption of his former thanksgiving and praises (cf. verse 1) in the congregation.

Conclusion

There is much to learn both from Psalm 109 and the Igbo litigatory practice of *igoOfonaijuOgu*. It is that a firm stand is the best way to prevent sin. Psalm 109 and Igbo litigatory practices of *igoOfonaijuOgu* remind the “Saints” how the godly should respond to sin. In so doing each individual is reminded of the seriousness of sin and the terrible consequences which accompany it. To be soft on sin is to give it a greenhouse in which to grow. To be hard on sin is to hinder its growth.

The amazing thing is that when people strive to conjure up human feelings of love and forgiveness, they really cannot love or forgive their enemies. The best they can do is to suppress their feelings of anger and hostility. When people pray as is seen in Psalm 109 or *igoOfonaijuOgu*, they admit their feelings and their desires (which were in accordance with God’s character and His Covenant with men). The people are thereby relieved of their hostility by committing the destiny of the wicked to God. Punishment and vengeance belong to God. By giving up vengeance one frees self to love and to forgive in a way that such person cannot produce in and of himself.

Therefore, In the face of the current realities in Nigeria, where people are being mowed down because they are powerless, where sanctity of human life is no longer guaranteed, where politicians and those in authority think they can subjugate, dehumanize and/or tyrannize the people and go away with it, a re-reading and/or understanding of Psalm 109 with Igbo litigatory prayer of *igoOfonaijuOgu* is imperative. There is the need to once again look at this psalm in the genre of prayer as one that pleads for ethical behaviour, justice, protection and vindication of truth and innocence. In Psalm 109 the psalmist uses successfully verses 6-19 to substantiate the allegation he makes against his enemies in verses 2-5. It is only when Psalm 109 are understood in this way that the entire psalm will be true to its genre as litigatory prayer through which the “prayerer” pleads his

benevolent disposition and leaves judgment and justice to God especially when the stage in the community is set against its realisation. Reading through the rituals of *igoOfonaijuOgu* with its understanding of Psalm 109, one therefore argues that the psalm is better understood as a Litigatoryprayer to God.

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