

From Folkism to Neo-Folkism and the Poetics of Ukala's Dramaturgy

Stephen Ogheneruro Okpadah

PhD Scholar

Department of the Performing Arts
University of Ilorin, Nigeria

Abstract

The search for an authentic Nigerian cum African theatre is not a recent phenomenon. It has led to the crystallisation and theorisation of various theatre modes as others continue to emerge. These modes though eclectic, are patterned in line with traditional African theatre practice. Sam Ukala's folkism is not an exception. This study therefore examines the aesthetics of African dramaturgy in Sam Ukala's folkism. It investigates the transition from folkism to neo-folkism in Ukala's theatre. Historical and analytical methods are utilised as the study historicises the search for an indigenous Nigerian theatre with content analysis of Ukala's Plays. Our findings reveal that the search for an authentic Nigerian theatre continues, that precursory to the theorisation of the term folkism, constituents of its aesthetics existed in Nigerian dramaturgy and that there is a transition from folkism, to what we term neo-folkism. We conclude that Ukala in particular and Nigerian dramatists in general are still in search of an authentic African aesthetics.

Key words: Dramaturgy, Aesthetics, African Theatre, Folkism, Neo-Folkism

Introduction

The existence of theatre in pre-colonial Africa is evidenced in numerous researches carried out by theatre scholars such as Amankulor (1981), Adelugba (1981), Clark (1981), Enekwe (1981), Nzekwu (1981), Rotimi (1981), Anigala (2006), Adeoye (2012), among others. Although there were polemical assertions on quasi-dramatic modes made by Eurocentric elements such as Ruth Finnegan, Michael Echeruo and Kalu Uka, it has been intellectually crystallized that with the substantiation of elements of the dramatic cum imitation in storytelling, festival and the masquerade art in pre-colonial Nigeria, drama had been inherent in pre-colonial Nigerian and African societies. In the colonial era there was the concert tradition and the Yoruba travelling theatre pioneered by Hubert Ogunde. Literary theatre in Nigeria was well defined in the postcolonial era with the intellectuals such as Soyinka, Clark and Rotimi.

With the literary theatre through the emergent tradition, the search for an authentic Nigerian theatre began. Theatre practitioners sought to decolonize the colonial and neo colonial

toga worn by Nigerian theatre in particular and literature in its entirety. However, the influence of colonialism led to a theatre of hybridism. Though the language and content of these plays were partially Africanized with the fusion of Nigerian proverbs and other traditional aesthetics, the proscenium stage still remained sacrosanct. In furtherance of the move for the decolonization of Nigerian theatre, playwrights such as J. P. Clark with the *Ozidi Saga* sought for a storytelling theatre tradition with the theatre in the round convention. Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Morontodun* are modeled in the traditional African actor-audience rapport tradition. Thus, the theatre of communion took root on the Nigerian stage. Various playwrights and critics saw the insufficiency of the African elements in these plays and this culminated into Sam Ukala's theorization of Folkism. However, folkism has gone beyond the rubrics of the term with recent plays of the aforementioned playwright such as *Iredi War*, hence our coinage of the term, neo-folkism which is the thrust of this study. To this end, this study examines the aesthetics of African dramaturgy in Sam Ukala's folkism. It investigates the transition from Folkism into neo-folkism in Ukala's theatre.

The Search for an Indigenous Nigerian Theatre

Should we have modern Art in Africa or Modern African art? Modern poetry in Africa or Modern African poetry? Should we import Modernity into Africa, or create an African Modernity?... (Chinweizu 219).

In colonial Nigeria, the search for an indigenous Nigeria theatre could be traced back to the Yoruba travelling theatre praxis championed by Hubert Ogunde, a teacher turned policeman turned theatre practitioner. After his first native air opera, *The Garden of Eden and the Throne of God* performed in 1944 in the auspices of The Church of the Lord Ebute-Metta, the African Music Research Party which later became Ogunde Theatre Company was geared towards portraying the African culture as Egun states that "The aim of the party, which is still one of the aims of the Ogunde Theatre Company is to go deeply into African Music and Dances, so as to preserve and improve upon what had even been a source of joy and amusement to our forefathers in the past" (10). Precursory to Hubert Ogunde's venture into the theatre domain, performances done at the Captain Glover memorial hall which opened in 1899 were mostly of western taste as Geoffrey Axworthy in Yerima posits:

The Glover Memorial Hall which had been opened in 1899 also existed. By the time I came, but few dramatic activities were done. These church festivals or cantata consisted of songs, a little dialogue, instrumental pieces and poetic recitations. Professor R A Coker was the champion of such organizations of what came to be known as the Handel festivals. (21-22)

The performances were modeled after the aesthetics of western culture. Herbert Macaulay, the father of Nigerian nationalism who played a major role in the introduction of film in Nigeria also partook in this theatre business. One of its major features is that his theatre foray diverges a lot from the concert parties in Ghana that were syncretic in form. Hence, most of the Handel festivals were elitist in nature as Echeruo (1981, p.357) states that:

Obviously, though, one cannot consider these Lagos concerts in Isolation from the general scheme of the concert and the music hall in England and the continent, especially as there was a keen desire on the part of the small Lagos *elite* to demonstrate an interest in an appreciation of music and theatre in so far as these were symbols of status and of culture.

The Brazilian Dramatic Society, the Lagos Glee Singers and the aforementioned Coker Festivals though at some point added some traditional elements to their theatres still remained aristocratic as they were more patronized by the elites. With the popular theatre of Ogunde, Ladipo and Ogunmola, the search for an authentic Nigerian theatre took root. Duro Ladipo's *Oba Koso*, *Oba Waja* and *Oba Moro* are a celebration of Yoruba history. It was a blend of Yoruba traditional songs and dances with traditional instrumentation and costumes. With them, a theatre of syncretism took root in Nigeria. Geoffrey Axworthy who ventured into the university of Ibadan for educational theatre business, experimented on a Nigerianization of the content of the western plays performed as Yerima notes that "the first production we took was Moliere's *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, adapted by Dapo Adelugba, Alfred Opubor, Brownson Dede and Ayo Amu. They called it *That Scoundrel Suberu*... The master spoke educated Nigerian English, the servants pidgin" (22). Hence, beyond the Yoruba popular theatre, there was an attempt at an indigenous literary theatre. But suffice to say that early playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, J P Clark and Ola Rotimi's early plays leans heavily on the indigenization of theatre in Nigeria.

Clark's *Ozidi*, a storytelling tradition of the Izon people of Delta State Nigeria, is an attempt at utilizing the culture of his people as a raw material for the creation of his art. *Song of a Goat* with its classical convention is set in Izon with characters created from the same place. In the same vein, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is a blend of fact and fiction. Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame* is a Yorubanization cum Nigerianization of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. Hence, it was adapted into the Nigerian situation. Ogunbiyi evaluates the language used in the works of Nigerian playwrights as he posits that "Rotimi seems to have the Nigerian audience in mind. Rotimi's approach in majority of his works has been that of winnowing, selecting, and finding words, phrases and images that run close to vernacular parlance" (41). Rotimi writes with the semi-literate and the literate in mind so as to achieve a mass appeal. In contrast, Wole Soyinka's works are more difficult to understand as he (Soyinka) states in Ogunbiyi that "... quite frankly, I do not think of any audience when I write... So when I write, I write in the absolute confidence that it must have an audience" (41). Despite Soyinka's enigmatic English, he had previously experimented with works such as *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *The Lion and the Jewel*. The aforementioned plays are devoid of the obscure and puzzling language of most of his plays. However, most of their plays were still difficult to understand by the Nigerian folk as Anigala avers that "the high sounding language, impregnated with poetic symbols has widened the gulf between these artistic creation and their audience. Because of this, a number of African playwrights have been tagged obscurantist writers" (39). These playwrights could not effectively disseminate their message across to their audience due to the elevated language and situation they employ in their works.

Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest* and *The Road* are complex arts that cannot be easily decoded by an audience. Hence, Ukala corroborates this observation thus: "A close look at important works of African literature already published at that time, including those of Achebe, Soyinka, J. P. Clark and Wa Thiong'o, may reveal any other shortcomings but playing to European gallery" (25). The implication of Ukala's assertion is that African playwrights exemplified in the aforementioned dramatists did not fully communicate their message to their audience in the traditional model.

Tunde Fatunde's drama of Pidgin English expression is also an experiment at creating his art for a wider audience. Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame* with a narrator in its opening scene, J P Clark's *Ozidi* with its Izon cultural aesthetics and Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* with the Anansem storytelling model which she appropriated Anansegoro, are built in the rubric of African culture. Efua Sutherland is worthy of note here with her crystallization of the Anansem traditional storytelling mode on the modern stage and termed it Anansegoro. "The marriage of Anansewa... perhaps by her own experiments with the cultural particulars of traditional Ghanaian theatre to serve modern terms of dramaturgy" (Ukala 2). Femi Osofisan's experimentation with Marxist aesthetics and the Brechtian Epic theatre mode is an attempt at authenticating and an originality of a traditional theatre in the African sense. Thus, *Once Upon four robbers* and *Morountodun* are theatres of spiritual communion. This is a spiritual communion nay, a fraternisation between the actors and the audience. This is characteristic of traditional African drama as Anigala state that "festival theatres thrive on the spectator support given to it. The survival and success of traditional displays depend on the reaction of the audience-that element of communal sharing... The audience is therefore an integral element in any dramatic or theatrical performance" (26-27). The above is exemplified in the lines below:

"Director: There'll be no disturbance tonight. (*He watches them for a while then steps out of place and approaches the audience*) Good evening ladies and gentlemen, we will soon be starting." (Rotimi 1)

The thrust of the above lines is to facilitate the actor and audience rapport which is a paramount characteristic of African theatre. Beyond this, the gulf between the African and an understanding of the plays was still wide. The plays could still not be called authentic African products because of their lack of traditional African aesthetics. It is in an attempt to totally Nigerianise the content and style in dramaturgy that Ukala's propounded the theory, folkism.

Aesthetics of Folkism in Ukala's Dramaturgy

The terms, folk, folk art, folklore, folk music, folk dance, folktale, folklorist, had been crystallised and conceptualised before Sam Ukala's theorisation of his dramaturgy, folkism. The point of convergence in the aforementioned words, is that they are rooted in nativistic and traditional culture. In fact, they are people oriented. What is folkism and what makes Ukala's

theatre distinctive from the theatres that precedes it? Ukala defines folkism as “the tendency to base literary plays on the history, culture and concerns of the folk (the ‘people in general’...), and to compose and perform them in accordance with African conventions for composing and performing the folktales” (6). In other words, plays that adhere to the convention of Folkism, must be grounded in the culture and mores of the people. Beyond this, the technicality of the play must conform to the traditional African storytelling mode. The traditional African theatre is a festival theatre. It is a theatre where performers and spectators converge. There is no clear demarcation between performers and spectators, hence the spectators are co-performers. It is in the light of the above, that Anigala citing Saint Gbilekaa, posits that “Sam Ukala’s theatre leans heavily on folkist techniques based on the aesthetics of the storytelling theatre.

The storytelling theatre is an embodiment of devices and techniques of the oral mode of performance” (41). Ukala’s experiment began with *The Slave Wife* which is a quasi-folk script. *The Slave Wife* incorporates a few tenets of Folkism. However, his plays such as *Placenta of Death* (formerly *The Placenta Soup*), *Break a Boil* and *Akpakaland* are in the spectrum of Folkism. Their conformity to Folkism is predicated on the playwright’s incorporation of the eight laws of aesthetic response as propounded by Sam Ukala. Commenting on Ukala’s theory, Anigala articulates the eight laws or poetics of aesthetic response viz:

- The law of opening
- The law of joint performance
- The law of creativity, free enactment and responsibility
- The law of the urge to judge
- The law of protest against suspense
- The law of expression of the emotions
- The law of ego projection
- The law of closing. (42)

The above canons are what determine a folkscript. Like Realism, Naturalism, Absurdism, Classicism, Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Expressionism, Symbolism post modernism, post-post modernism and other theatre conventions that are defined by their features, an ideal folk script is appraised with the aforementioned laws including proverbs, enriched diction,

ideophones, dance and songs that are integral arts in traditional African performances. “I branded or theorized the modern African theatre, which informed critics think African audiences would identify with- I call it Folkism and clearly delineate its features” (Ukala 31). To properly facilitate audience-actors rapport, he invented the M.O.A or Members of the Audience, characters that would act as a nexus between the performers and spectators. These characters contribute to the development of the plot as it is in the conversation below, in the *Placenta of Death*.

IBO: ... here is white chalk

White chalk

White chalk

It's white chalk

That I have for she that has come

No one kills the teeth of laughter

M.O.A: So this is laughter that you are laughing?

IBO: Why not? (Ukala 6-17)

Ibo is aware of the M.O.A the same way the M.O.A is aware of the role being played by Ibo. The M.O.A comments on the actions of the characters. They commend good characters and virtue and criticize villains and vices. Here in lies the importance of the M.O.A in the traditional African theatre mode as Anigala states that “audience involvement in the performance also enhances their understanding of the play. They live the play, literarily empathizing and sympathizing with various characters” (48). The fourth wall tradition is broken as a narrator who is the story teller relates the story. Sometimes, he plays a role in the performance as it is exemplified in *Break a Boil* where the storyteller, Nkanka is one of the major characters. When the storyteller falls asleep or dies in course of the performance or performs below expectation, another character continues from where he stopped. In *Break a Boil*, Nkanka the raconteur is killed by Uwa. Ison, Gidi's first wife continues from where Nkanka stops. Ukala's search for an authentic Nigerian cum African theatre still continues as Uche Mowah in Ukala notes that “Sam Ukala is still searching, not for love as Bongos Ikwe is ever doing, but for a dramatic category” (38). The success of Folkism in theory and praxis, hasn't stopped Ukala from furthering the

cause of validating the authenticity of his theatre, nay an African theatre, hence, the poetics of what I termed Neo-Folkism-a slight, perhaps a gradual departure from Folkism as appropriated by Sam Ukala in his dramaturgy.

From Folkism to Neo-Folkism: *Iredi War* as a Paradigm

Sam Ukala's recent dramaturgy had gone beyond his theatre known as Folkism. This is dramatized in his award winning play, *Iredi War* (2014). A factionalized history of the war between the British imperialist and the people of Owa kingdom, *Iredi War* historicizes and unlocks the historic event nay the oppression and suppression of empires by the British colonial masters. The implication of the above assertion is not far-fetched from the fact that the text is relevant to the politics of power play in the new world order, where world powers determine the pace and trend of politics in under developed and developing nations. *Iredi War* succinctly adheres to the theory of Folkism. The tenets of Folkism which includes the eight laws of aesthetic response, the M.O.A, idiophones, songs, dances and other elements that characterize the total African theatre are established in it. However, the substance of this play is located in its incorporation of new aesthetics. This implies that *Iredi War* transcends Folkism. But what are the factors that make *Iredi War* goes beyond Folkism? The dramaturge's creative impulse comes to play in his application of *The Beginning*, *The Middle* and *The Ending*, in place of the traditional act and scenes, movements and situations. Originally, Sam Ukala had always utilized the nomenclatures, *Scenes*, *Acts*, *Situations* and *Movements* in his previous plays. However, the reverse is the case in *Iredi War*. This is a departure from his style at dramaturgy.

Furthermore, the M.O.A takes a different dimension in *Iredi War*. In folk scripts preceding this play, the members of the audience or M.O.A, are semi-actors. For instance, in his play, *The Last Heroes*, a pseudo-folkscript, the MOA comment on the action thus:

M.O.A I: *Sit down traitor!*

M.O.A II: *Go and teach strike breaker*

M.O.A III: *Stooge*

M.O.A IV: *Turncoat! What have you to tell us* (Ukala p.106)?

Placenta of Death, a full Folk script goes beyond the experimentation in *The Last Heroes* as the M.O.A goes beyond commenting on the action. They go as far as interacting with the characters.

M.O.A: *Ibo is pregnant?*

EBUZUN: *So she says...* (Ukala 17)

However, in *Iredi War*, a theatre of communion is created. The M.O.A plays alongside the performers. When Rudkin addresses an imaginary parade of troops, the voices do not only reply in response, the M.O.A also responds to facilitate the intimacy between the spec-actors and the performers. This is exemplified in the lines below:

RUDKIN: ... *They shall provide reinforcements when needed. Understood?*

VOICES/MOA: *Yes Sir!* (Ukala 73)

Here, the M.O.A collaborates with the voices. They perform alongside the performers. This play also explicates the dramaturgy of spiritual union. The concept of spiritual union here implies an understanding between the narrators/performers and the MOA/audience. The latter, assimilate what the former have said. There is also an inclusivity and integration of the latter in the action.

NARRATOR I: Advance, strike-

MOA/AUDIENCE:-and retreat! (Ukala 82)

Here, the MOA play the role of soldiers. The audience and MOA are so integrated that most times, they know what a character action would look like. The acme of *Iredi War*, is the dramaturge's utility of two narrators. Undoubtedly, this play is the playwright's first utilization of double narrators. This is a creative endeavour as only AbdulRasheed Adeoye, the proponent of neo-alienation have utilized this technique. Anigala states that "the narrator functions both as an umpire and a coordinator" (6). The dexterity and efficiency of the narrator determines the acceptability and success of the story. Hence, *Iredi War* incorporates two narrators to increase the curiosity of the audience and to facilitate an accuracy and factuality of the story as it is explicated below

(With angry hisses and shaking of their heads, PERFORMERS exit in different directions.)

M.O.A.: See! They're angry!

NARRATOR I: No ... they are in us. We merely displayed them for you to know them.

NARRATOR II: We tell parts of the story-

NARRATOR I: -and enact parts. And when we enact-

NARRATOR II: -we summon them from our bowel-

NARRATOR I: -our mind,

NARRATOR II: -Our head.

NARRATOR I: We externalize them as demonstrations-

NARRATORS II: -as illustrations in the book of our story-

NARRATOR I & NARRATOR II: -for your better understanding! (Ukala 13)

The narrators are the prime movers of the performance as they integrate the spectators into the art of music, dance and drama. They pilot the play. Narrator I and Narrator II are part of the dramatic piece from the beginning to the end. The two narrators stir the vehicle (story) from the beginning to the end. With the role they play, they also sustain the interest of the spectators in not only watching the performance, but in participating as well. This graduates into a theatre of festival which is a major characteristic of traditional African festival.

The situations portrayed in *Iredi War* though historical, is also relevant to the present situation in world politics. The imperialists suppression of their colonies which is exemplified in Crewe-Read and the people of Owa and the negative resultant effect is a gospel to the power blocs and the superiority complex of world and nuclear powers, which culminate into dictating the pace of politics in smaller nations, especially third world countries. Although culture is the nucleus on which every theatre is built, the thematic preoccupation of *Iredi War* is cosmopolitan and intercontinental. Although there are points of convergence between Femi Osofisan's theatre of poverty with its Marxist ideology, AbdulRasheed Adeoye's Neo-alienation and Ukala's dramaturgy, Neo-folkism could be said to be an ilk of theatre in the service of African renaissance.

Conclusion

There have been experiments by various African dramaturges on finding a suitable theatre that could be termed an authentic African theatre. Efua Sutherland with her aesthetics of *Anansegoro*, AbdulRASheed Adeoye's neo-alienation, Femi Osofisan and his *theatre of poverty*, Sunday Ododo's Facekuerade theatre, Tunde Fatunde's aesthetics of pidgin English, amongst others, have explicitly portrayed what could be used as a model for theatre performances in Nigeria cum Africa. However, with Ukala's theorization and appropriation of folkism, an intercontinental theatre model had been crystallized. With the foregoing, we state that, due to the communion between the performers (actors) and the co-performers (spectators), Ukala's dramaturgy is an appropriate model for African dramaturgy. In recent times, there had been a transition from folkism, to what we term neo-folkism in his theatre. The term neo-folkism is adopted due to the recent advancement in the poetics of Ukala's theatre. We conclude that Ukala in particular and Nigerian dramatists in general are still in search of an authentic African theatre.

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