

The Dramatic Content of African Drama: An Analysis of Contending Issues

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ABSTRACT: *Various African dramatists hold different views with regard to the validity of African drama. This disagreement is captured in the contentions of the evolutionary and relativistic theories of African drama. Evolutionary scholars maintain that African drama falls short of the expected requirements of drama. For one thing, African drama does not follow the Greek drama pattern. Again, it does not have a plot and linguistic content. The relativistic group contends that drama must not evolve from myth. They say that what qualifies an activity as drama is function and entertainment. Once an activity achieves the expected function in society, in addition to entertainment, it automatically qualifies as drama. This article investigates the arguments of these two schools of African drama and concludes that even if suspense and conflict are absent in a display, they can still qualify as drama if they contain mimesis and performances.*

Key Words: *African drama; African dramatist; political leadership; corruption; alternative tradition; evolutionary theory; relativistic theory.*

INTRODUCTION

Yemi Ogundibi has posited that the specific origins of Nigerian theatre and drama are speculative. What, however, is not speculative is the existence of a robust theatrical tradition" (1981:3). He adds that the earliest root of that tradition must be found in the numerous religious rituals and festivals in many Nigerian communities. The above claim is succinctly positioned in the clarification as Chris Nwamuo points out that traditional Nigerian societies were dotted with features like rituals, magic, sacrifices, festival dances, moonlight folktales, etc. (1989:9). These traditional activities were enacted at different occasions for various reasons. For example, the rituals and sacrifices were undertaken by village heads and titled men as a means of appeasing the gods of the land and soliciting their patronage.

According to Ernest Emenyonu, moonlight stories, folktales, jokes, etc. were performed as a vehicle for providing entertainment and education mainly for young people (1978:1). This form of theatre practiced in Africa was reflected primarily on the works of traditional artists like Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Gibson Kente, Gredo Mutwa, and others, who performed theatre activities in Indigenous languages. It was most

probably from such traditional sources that African drama and theatre as we have it today developed.

J.S. Mbiti has argued that "national crises like warfare, famine, epidemics, locust invasions, and major weather changes cause a revival of religious activities..." (1996:2). This is a circumstance that defines man turning to God as pragmatic and practical rather than spiritual or mystical. Mbiti further asserts that African religion has a wide variety of rituals. Some rituals concern the life of the individual from birth to after death. Others are specifically for the wider community, embracing its total life and activities. These cover the year's rhythm with its seasons and people's activities. Other rituals are performed occasionally, such as when there is war, raids, a locust invasion, or a natural calamity. Ritual generates a sense of certainty and familiarity. They provide continuity and unity among those who perform or attend them. In turn, people find identity through this common observance and experience. For example, young people who go through the same rite of circumcision are bound together into a unity, and each finds his own identity within the unity of that group. Through ritual action and words, people exercise a certain amount of control over the invisible world and the forces of nature. In this way, man feels that he is not just a passive creature in the universe but a creative agent. He uses almost everything at his disposal for ritual: oral formulas- especially invocations and prayers- and the help of mystical power if necessary (Mbiti 1996:126-127). Folktales are the most popular and important source of origin in African drama. As Ernest Emenyonu has noted:

Various African communities have traditions of folktale which feature some non-human beings endowed with human character traits as central characters. It could be 'anansi' the spider, 'Mbe' the tortoise, the hare, rabbit or praying mantis. Handicapped by their physical limitations, these creatures are able to escape from tight situations by resorting to a number of tactics including cunning, the ability to outwit adversaries and shrewdness. In African folktale, good always triumphs over evil, truth over falsehood, honesty over dishonesty. (1978:1)

Emenyonu further argues that the various qualities contained in the African folklore, such as parental responsibility for the safety, care, and upbringing of the young, respect for old age, labor, grace and beauty in women, strength and virility in men, social justice, and the spirit of daring, especially into the spirit world, were highly valued. In all this, the real significance of the folktale is that it demonstrates the logic of behavior and its vital implications and consequences for life in general (1978:1-2). Chinyere Nwahunaya strongly supports Emenyonu's submission. Nwahunaya avers that despite the ornamentation of shrine houses, or the carving of the images of gods, or even the composition of songs for worship of deities, and the admiration of their votaries and acolytes, all of which are for ritual purposes, we still have the replication of hairstyles on pottery from Nok, or the grandeur of Ife and Benin bronzes which suggest a secular

concern. We also have the songs and stories told on moonlight nights and other occasions with the primary intention to entertain, and the sayings, anecdotes, and quips, which still vitalize oral communication in traditional society. The consequent survival of beauty in oral art, and the irresistible urge to create the beautiful has remained the basic impulse behind the activities of artists, be they musicians, bards, carvers, or potters (Nwahunanya 2010:57). Nwahunanya further adumbrates the responsibility of the oral artist:

The oral literary artist was vested with enormous social responsibilities, especially with regard to his position as an entertainer and regulator of social behaviour. He was important as one of the society's mechanisms for social control, through the use into which he put his lyric poems, stories and the music that accompanied them. (2010:57-58)

In his article, "Forms of Folktale: Prose Narratives," William Bascom had earlier classified oral literature using such criteria as time and place, that is, the story's setting, the societal belief, attitudes, and the main characters of the stories. He further defines narratives, recalling that:

...myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith; they are taught to be believed; and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief. Myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual. Their main characters are animals, deities, or culture heroes, whose actions are set in an earlier world such as the sky or underworld ... (1965:4)

Nkem Okoh corroborates Bascom's view when he opines that in dealing with narration or narratives generally, we need to understand adequately such terms as 'truthful,' 'fictional,' 'factual', or 'non-factual' if they are to convey to our audience exactly what we mean. We need to realize that such terms are relative and cannot be approached with circumspection, especially as we move from one society to another (Okoh, 2008:117). Oladele Taiwo observes that, unlike myths and legends, folktales concentrate on situations familiar to the listeners as they recall some ancient customs like old forms of inheritance or primitive birth and marriage customs. Since folktale draws mainly from folklore, it remains predominantly didactic and moralistic (qtd in Okoh 2008:118). This accounts for why A.B.C. Duruaku refers to folktales as "didactic satires" (1997:15).

These fundamental aspects of African Culture are reflected in the works of contemporary African dramatists. This fact is undoubtedly portrayed in the works of most African playwrights, from the first-generation African playwrights led by Wole Soyinka through the second-generation to the very contemporary African playwrights. Each of

their works finds instances of ritual, festival, dance, folktales, magic, jokes, sacrifices, sayings, etc.

AFRICAN DRAMA: MYTH OR REALITY?

One argument that seems to have divided African dramatists is whether African drama exists. Ola Rotimi, in his paper "The Drama in African Ritual Display," clarifies that the standard acceptance of the term drama within a cultural setting, at any rate, implies "an imitation of an action or a person or persons in action," the ultimate object of which is to edify or to entertain—sometimes to do both"(1981:77).

Rotimi further contends that ritual displays that reveal in their style of presentation, in their purpose as well as value, palpable evidence of imitation, enlightenment, and or entertainment can be said to be drama. Rotimi accepts plot with its vital elements of suspense and conflict as an essential element of drama and admits that the traditional displays in Africa that have instances of suspense and conflict in their action presentation are few. He, however, identifies the annual "Obatala festival" in Ede, and the "Freketeduelsence" of Ile-Ife as traditional displays that have suspense and conflict (1981:79). In his paper entitled, "The Dramatic Limits of the Igbo Ritual", M.J.C. Echeruo had argued that,

drama flourishes in a community which has satisfactorily transformed ritual into celebration and converted the mythic structure of action from the religious and priestly to the secular Plane (Echeruo 1981:36-48).

Echeruo citing Ruth Finnegan further argues that the various traditional festivals in Africa cannot suffice as drama because such festivals are lacking in "linguistic content, plot, represented interaction of several characters, specialized scenery" (1981:137). One understands from Echeruo's postulation that the difference between drama and festival is not to be discovered in their external dramatic characteristics, for example, dance, song and costume, but in their elaboration of action. The question is whether such action is supported with dialogue as different from speech. Echeruo avers that the masquerade, for example, which is strongly rooted in Igbo land, can only become drama if its mime element is accompanied by a narrative or plot content. Otherwise, the operational force of the masquerade lies in ritual or symbolism. Echeruo's distrust of 'African drama' is steeped in Aristotelian concept of drama which considers the plot as the most important element of drama. He (Echeruo) cites some festivals like 'Mbom Ama festival', the 'Odo festival' and the "Ojiyi fertility festival" as festivals that contain hidden myth, lack plot and dialogue, and consequently cannot yield drama. He says that such festivals can only remain as ritual and spectacle, strongly pointing out that "... Ritual is, and has always been a dead end; it cannot grow. It only shrinks steadily into inevitably inaccessible (though powerful) symbolism" (1981:141-147).

Ossie Enekwe has classified the argument into the evolutionary and relativistic theories of African drama. He associates Echeruo's view with the evolutionary theory and has this to say about the relativistic theory:

The relativist view flatly contradicts the evolutionary one and insists that the ritual festivals in Africa represent full and authenticated drama that should be recognized as such; that they are communal dramas which differ from secular, individuated modern drama with its precise separation of its stage from the auditorium, of actors from the audience and stage time, from the duration of the experience enacted on the stage. (1981:149)

Contrary to Echeruo's view that myth is the soul of drama, Enekwe points out that drama must not evolve from myth and that if drama contains elements of myth, the myth is not used for itself but for social restructuring. Myth is important because it accounts for an ideological position, the ideology of the time. Enekwe talks about the Italian "Commedi dell'arte", the "Balinese Legong drama", the "Indian Sanskrit drama", and the "Elizabethan drama" as dramas which were enacted to satisfy specific needs and expectations in their societies at various times and argues that function determines the nature of drama in every culture (1981:150-152).

Emmanuel Obiechina in his view discards the position of the evolutionary scholars who posit that modern Igbo drama must follow "identical linear development of the Greek drama the Dionysian and Apollonian festival" (Obiechina 30). Obiechina asserts that African drama cannot develop like the classical Greek drama because Africa has a history and a culture different from the Greeks. Greek drama is not paradigmatic of every dramatic development and must not be repeated elsewhere (Obiechina, 1978: 31). He further questions:

Is there any particular reason, except that of meeting the specifically practical pressures of the present age, why an enactment should last only two or three hours instead of six months? Is the sense of organic Unity which we assume in the modern theatre and its conventions not possible on an extended scale among a people whose sensibilities are trained to absorb more diffused ritual and symbolic significance of action? Is a broad communal canvas not more suitable for painting more inclusive social and emotional action than the mere mouse- tongue platform called the modern stage. (1978:28-29)

J.O.J Nwachukwu-Agbada's essay entitled "Is Igbo Traditional Drama Drama? A Survey Essay on A Controversy" surveyed this debate that has lasted for decades. He limited his submission on the validity of Igbo drama to the views advanced by scholars of Igbo origin. His reason for such a delimitation is better expressed in his own words: "This is to make the study more manageable and compact, and probably record the extent

as well that one single paper presentation could go in stirring a hornet's nest in the very heart of a responsive ethnic academia."(2009:10).

Nwachukwu-Agbada captures under the evolutionary school M.J.C. Echeruo, whose argument and hard stance sparked off the age-long debate in 1971; Kalu Uka, a renowned theatre practitioner; and Ogonna Agu, a theatre scholar who was trained at the University of Nigeria. Kalu Uka for example frantically furthers the argument of the evolutionary scholars by insisting that there is no such thing as Igbo performances as dramatic forms. According to him " what some usually and glibly call traditional drama is properly and essentially elements of drama". These elements of drama constitute "a huge legacy upon which drama may draw with ever-increasing returns."Uka sums up the stance of the evolutionary scholars by humorously reminding us that "the store may be rich, but the key to the lock must be found, and found, the researchers and their yields in the many plays which readapt traditional elements of drama, are only one possible reaping of the fruits of the vineyard of the past" (qtd in Nwachukwu-Agbada 2009:13-14).

Under the relativist school, Nwachukwu-Agbada captures Ossie Enekwe (a former student of Echeruo) Emmanuel Obiechina, MekiNzewi, L.E.N. Ekwueme, J.N. Amankulor, Emeka Nwabueze, Afam Ebeogu and Nnabuenyi Ugonna. Nwachukwu-Agbada finds fascinating the attempt by relativist scholars to define drama and relate such definitions to both Greek drama and African drama with the revelation that function more than any other yardstick should be used to determine what constitutes drama. Afam Ebeogu, for example, insists that a play is realized not in "the anatomical relationship of its components or the so-called elements but rather in the context of the ambiance of performance." He further demonstrates:

The ritual experience, as we understand it, is a dramatic experience just as the secular theatre is also a dramatic experience. Both have different functional purposes, both serve different communities and sensibilities, and both have their own degrees of aesthetic appeal. But there could be, but there need not be, an evolutionary relationship between them. (qtd in Nwachukwu- Agbada 2009: 20-21)

Nwachukwu-Agbada's submission is a survey that portrays the arguments of the two schools. However, it bears the writer's strong feelings and conviction on the debate. He does not pretend about his penchant for the relativist school. He, for example, joins Emmanuel Obiechina in wondering if there is "really a universal rule on what drama should be or what it should be constituted of." he further queries, "Must all drama be of the Western format or is there a recommended dosage or breadth of mythos which must exist in any dramatic tradition before it is admitted in the Hall of fame of drama" (2009:18). Nwachukwu-Agbada believes that "if each assertive essay begins with a definition of drama, it may be useful to know where the problem is" and is worried that "whereas the relativists in this debate are keen to define drama, depict the dramanness in Igbo performances as well as try to juxtapose such a definition or definitions with the

Western praxis, the evolutionists have not shown an equivalent concern"(2009:18).The resolution of this protracted argument on the validity of African drama seems to me to be found in the following words of Rotimi:

...it is only appropriate that the word drama when used to refer to traditional displays should imply an immanence of suspense and or conflict within the body of the approved action. Where suspense or conflict is absent, then the meaning of the term must rest on the broader sense of mimesis in the performance. (1981:80)

Beyond the fact of its origin and validity, African drama has grown in leaps and bounds. Sonny Oti says that the tradition of concert parties, for example, was popularized by Bob Johnson (a Ghanaian) and influenced and produced artists like Hubert Ogunde and other artists. Hubert Ogunde founded the first Yoruba travelling theatre in the 1940s. Ogunde's plays include: "Strike and Hunger" (1945), "Bread and Bullets" (1951), and "Yoruba Ronu" (1964). Ogunde's drama, which primarily features long musical opening glees, stock cultural dances, acrobatic displays, coupled with strong audience participation has come to be recognized as the "Ogunde tradition" (Ogundeji 1987). By the early sixties, African artists and dramatists had recorded a crucial progression. The artists were closely associated with the Mbari Club at Ibadan. They included: Wole Soyinka, D.O. Fagunwa, J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Ezekiel Mhahlele, Ulli Brier, Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Segun Olusola, Dapo Adelugba, Michael Crowder, Kola Ogunmola, Ralph Opara, Gerald Moore, Geoffrey Axworthy, Martin Banham, John Fergusson, Joel Adediji, Peggy Harper, Frank Speed etc. (Sonny Oti, 1989:24).

According to Oti, the prominent plays of the period include Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest*. This seemingly prophetic play expressed the playwright's doubt and concern for the survival of the newly Independent Nigeria. *A Dance of the Forests* was written and staged For Nigeria's Independence Day celebration on October 1,1960. Soyinka's other play, *Madmen and Specialists*, questions the logic of the Nigerian civil war that lasted for thirty months. J.P. Clark's *Song of A Goat*, *The Masquerade*, and *The Raft* expressed doubt over the survival of the Nigerian nation. *The Raft*, for example, specifically foretold a bleak future for the new nation. Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame* (1968) is a critical adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Duro Ladipo's play, "Oba Koso", a Yoruba folk Opera, and Amos Tutuola's novel *The Palm wine Drinkard* was adapted for stage by Kola Ogunmola. Between 1961 and 1964, the Ibadan University travelling theatre was actively touring with such English plays as *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *A Mid Summer Night Dream*, *Henry IV*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Merchant of Venice* (Oti 1989:25).

The military incursion into Nigeria's political life, the Nigerian civil war, the oil bloom, and the general political unrest sweeping through the entire African continent led to the inevitable emergence of a new set of Nigerian playwrights. This new set of playwrights took a different posture, in active response to the prevailing strange

psychosocial idiosyncrasies. Ademola Dasylva says that "they were more forthcoming in their persistent criticism of the military dictatorship than their predecessors" (113). Such works include Bode Sowande's *Afamako*, *The Work Horse* (1973), Kole Omotoso's *The Curse* (1976), *Shadows in the Horizon* (1977), Femi Osofisan's *The Chattering and the Song* (1977), Bode Sowande's *Flamingo* (1982), Osofisan's *The Midnight Hotel* (1986), Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), Osofisan's *Esu and Vagabond Minstrels* (1992), extensively discuss the spate of corruption and the fast depreciating condition of the masses in Nigeria, and recommend persistent collaboration and unity of purpose for the masses to overcome their predicaments (Dasylva, 114).

CONCLUSIONS

These playwrights respond to a scenario perhaps aptly captured by I.H. Hagher when he said:

While history indicates a more prosperous Africa past, present reality is grim. From a recent history of inter-ethnic wars and the subsequent trade and colonialism, most African nations found themselves in the last thirty years to be independent and self-governing. Most of the political leadership has been reasonably educated. Yet the sad story of Africa's political post-independent government cannot be regrettable enough. The leaders acting as if they had been programmed by an alien power to destroy their nations have with almost no exception, engaged in anti-people activities of plundering their national economies. Criticism is brutally repressed while sycophancy extolled as a virtue. Almost all the nations have failed to evolve a democratic tradition... (1994:140).

The relativistic school's postulation seems to be clearly vindicated. African drama, through the manifestation of robust themes and techniques, has adduced itself as a potent force for social reconstruction. It has exposed the spate of corruption and the fast-depreciating condition of the masses. Beyond this, it has empowered the masses and offered collaboration and unity as solutions to their problems.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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