The Relevance of MJC Echeruo's "Dramatic Limits of Igbo Rituals" in Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman and Esiaba Irobi's the Other Side of the Mask and the Fronded Circle

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ABSTRACT

Against the conception of the Igbo (African) culture which is rich and made up fully with rituals and myths as a dead end, Wole Soyinka and Esiaba Irobi among many other African playwrights, draw from their rich cultural heritage in dramaturgy to validate MJC Echeruo's postulation in his article "The Dramatic Limits of the Igbo Rituals" that the African ritual and myth can form basis for dramaturgy. Echeruo in that critical work has maintained that the Igbo (Africans) should do what the Greeks did, that is, to broaden the perspective of the ritual (myth) and give it a secular pedestal. This work is an investigation into selected works of the two playwrights Soyinka and Irobi to articulate the essence of Echeruo's theory on African ritual dramaturgy. Wole Soyinka, in Death and the King's Horseman, draws from his Yoruba mythological cosmology as well as his conceptual universal god, Ogun, to bear on the Greek concept of tragedy; thereby affirming the consistence of the African concept of tragedy with that of Greece. Irobi, like Soyinka, in The Other Side of the Mask, recreates the primordial belief in the justice of Amadioha, the Igbo god of justice, which he locates partly in Soyinka's Ogun. In what Isidore Diala (2005: 87) refers to as "his audacious innovativeness" in "Igbo theatre/tragedy", he has attached tradition with Marxist revolutionary aesthetics in that drama to elucidate the Nigerian economic situation especially as regard the youth restiveness in an environment that abhors them. In this work, Irobi expounds the youth quest for recognition and the denial of this right by the powers that be.

Generally therefore, this paper authenticates the fact that, not only can African cultural heritage, (myth and ritual) form basis for drama but that the efficacious power of the primeval ritual is not lost by locating it in dramaturgy.

INTRODUCTION

Michael Echeruo had the privilege of studying Greek literature and had likened African ritual to partisan and communal activities to the notification of other African scholars that felt that African drama should include ideologies. He discerns in "Dramatic Limits of Igbo Rituals" thus:

What is needed then, it seems to me, is to force that ritual to yield its story; to cut through the overlay of ceremony to the primary events of mythos. Ritual is, and has always been, a dead end, it cannot grow. It only shrinks steadily into inevitably inaccessible (though powerful) symbolism. The Igbo should do what the Greeks did: expand ritual into life and give that life a secular base (147).

As scholars like Soyinka, Obumselu and Craft's attempt at finding the important features of African drama, it could be observed that some playwrights have taken sides with the evolutionist and relativist schools of thought. The evolutionists like Echeruo argue that ritual contains elements of drama but not necessarily drama unlike the relativist school that tends to agree that drama by nature is a mere facsimile of reality. It accepts the basic functionality of the dramatic experience and acknowledges the indebtedness of African playwrights to indigenous traditional performances. African critics like Obiechina and Enekwe hold strong views on the nature of impressive stylized performances and poetic invocation which had

equally provided an avenue for spectacle, dancing, conviviality; rooted in all the tensions of a contemporary post colonial society, and demonstrating an awareness of the dramatic conventions of the West. Irobi's drama invariably tends to the climatic ritual situation of communion, expiation or celebration inscribed as a validation of ancient wisdom (4). Some scholars like Enekwe insist that "ritual becomes entertainment once it is outside its original context or when the belief that sustains it has lost its potency" (155).

Irobi illustrates, using his works, that ritual could still hold its potency to a large extent by sacredness and efficacy. According to Diala, "... Irobi apparently aims to highlight its (rituals) sacredness and efficacy, to revive and revalidate the faith that nurtured and sustained ritual while fundamentally transforming it with an eye on secular roles." (4) It could be that Irobi is recreating Igbo myth to his ideological position of finding an alternative to African literary tradition by recreating Igbo cultural experiences into models that is acceptable to a larger community. It could also be said that Irobi's plays to some extent have features that are different from Soyinka's.

From the Yoruba standpoint, Soyinka provides significant models for African drama development by allowing these models to question the universality of European paradigms and at the same time creating traditional African motifs". In Myth, Literature and the African World, Soyinka articulates a tragic vision by pointing out the continuous effort of African playwrights to redefine tragedy as it relates to culture or personal experience. Diala asserts of Soyinka:

Writing then from a Yoruba perspective, Soyinka accounts for tragedy basically in terms of the pains and glory of the pilgrimage through the abyss of dissolution in a striving towards a reintegration of self with essence. However, by repeatedly summoning Hellenistic tragic paradigms and Nietzsche's ideas, Soyinka apparently valorizes them as points of departure and as classical models against which he must measure his revelations. (5)

Soyinka Opines

Suffering cancels the opaque of human existence: suffering, the truly overwhelming suffering of Sango, of Lear, of Oedipus, this suffering hones the psyche to a finely self -annihilating perceptiveness and renders further action futile and above all, lacking indignity. And what has the struggle of the tragic hero been, after all, but an effort to maintain that inmate concept of dignity which impels to action only to that degree in which the hero possesses a true nobility of spirit. At such moments he is close to the acceptance and wisdom of Obatala in which faith is rested, not on the self, but on a universal selfhood to which individual contributions are fundamentally meaningless. (134)

From the above, it is evident that Soyinka is not averse to individual contributions only that he employs European models in order to question their authority. Diala observes, "... Soyinka' s ambition is to displace European tragic paradigms by his post - colonial model. Ogun is Dionysius, Appollo and Prometheus all in one. To this unapologetic exaltation of Ogun may well be traced the vital source of the inspiration and model firing the zeal of generations of African writers to search the African pantheons, myths and legends for deity - heroes capable of stimulating the creative imagination and dramatic action or of illuminating the human situation (6).

Based on the above premise, Irobi's plays could be understood. Irobi's works portray the frustrations and the displacement of the Nigerian youth by the country's leadership be it military or civilian and suggests according to Diala "a violent ethic as a resolution to the corruption of Nigerian politics". It could be said that Irobi's plays are based on ritual symbolism using his Igbo cultural experience on myth to understand his present environment. For instance, he employs Amadioha, the Igbo god of thunder, lightning and justice and most times recreates him partly as Ogun. For one who is looking for total cleansing of his society, he vividly uses Amadioha as one sees in The Other Side of the Mask. The play is a thorough interpretation of Igbo traditional worldview of the relationship between art, religion and spiritual society.

Jamike, the hero is seen by Irobi as a prophet and priest. Jamike as a sculptor follows the footsteps of his father and grandfather. He inherits the tending of the family god, Amadioha. Iwe says:

Amadioha is regarded in Igbo land as a divinity of vengeance against the wicked and evil doers. Victims of Amadioha are as a rule not given a normal burial, and their possession, especially moveable property and personal effects, are either ritually alienated or publicly cast away as refuse. Some call Amadioha God's minister of justice. (14).

In using Igbo ritual, Irobi enlightens his audience on the Igbo vision of tragedy.

Amadioha is portrayed in The Other side of the Mask as "a god of justice and a small carving made of wood and copper" (20) carved by Jamike's father. Also in Irobi's Nwokedi, the political associates of Nwokedi Senior under his persuasion swear an oath on an "evil - looking juju effigy" (1) of Amadioha. In The Other Side of the Mask, Kamuche is relieved when Zhipora informs him that Jamike is tending the Amadioha. Kamuche says of Amadioha, "the god of justice, Amadioha! If solicited, it can send thunder and lightning to one's enemies. (20) After six years of frustrating Jamike by denying him sculptor National award, he alerts Njemanze:

Prof., I mentioned your name, the names of the other judges and my own name before the incantations. So if I am wrong in my assertions about the quality of my works, I will die tonight. But if I am right, if the judges have used my genitals as a rope to tie me to tether of failure, the judges will all die tonight including you, Prof. (80)

It could be argued that incantations are done under possession as Jamike under the possession of Amadioha could not remember whether he mentioned Dr. Animalu's name in his presentation of petition to Amadioha. It is through the crafty presentation of Amadioha in The Other Side of the Mask that one is enlightened concerning the myth of an Igbo god, Amadioha by Irobi enlarging and modifying it (Amadioha). If Jamike's greatness is weighed by winning international award, then the Igbo model of an artist in terms of relevance to society should be respected. Jamike comments:

Prof., a time there was when a sculptor had his place in society when he was venerated. When he moulded the images of the god of his clan. When he, a mere artist, held captive, for one whole year, the garment of wood for the naked spirit of the festival of life. When he stood out among his fellow men and was revered. But now ... (84)

Again, Irobi tries to explore the long ancient belief of lunacy and inspiration using The Other Side of the Mask. As most of the characters are scholars, he (Irobi) uses them to comment that knowledge, madness and inspiration go hand in hand in Igbo cosmology just like in European art and history. Through Jamike, one realizes that artists may go mad if denied recognition. Njemanze helpfully adds;

Artists. . . whether poets or painters or sculptors or musicians ... often go mad because they work very close to dream and intuition and impulse... that's why they go mad or have mental breakdowns more often than other people. Their work is extremely hazardous both to the body and the spirit. Remember Van Gogh.... (89)

Jamike likens himself to European artists, "Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci ..." (13) Although the evolutionists may argue that the duty of art is basically in the European tradition, the association of lunacy and inspiration is an ancient Igbo worldview being linked with the Igbo god, 'Agwu'. Although Agwu is the god of divination and inspiration, it is also has "feature linked with lunacy and other abnormal behavior which a person may have under the possession of Agwu. Agwu also can frustrate human efforts as one observes in Jamike. He asks, "Why is it that every work I carve becomes a knife that laughs into the flesh of my life?" (53) Towards the end of the play, it is noticed that there is an agreement in Jamike's role as priest and artist as resolutions become similar. Diala observes:

The expectation of Amadioha' s verdict, of the outcome of the international art competition and of the

resolution of the grim battle between Elesie (and her promise of a normal life of conviviality) and Ziphora, all on the night of the ritual propitiatory sacrifice of Amadioha in which Jamike' s role is again central: all these stretch the anxieties of the audience to the fullest. The point is that in the process, Irobi recreates the myth and the god, annexing the roles of Ala (the patroness of the arts) and Ahiajioku (the god of fertility) in Igbo cosmology. (30).

From the above comment, it could be said that the artist is not restricted to present his people's worldview as they really are but could interchange the functions of myth to suit present situation of society but in doing this there should be a clear distinction between his people's belief and his recreation of the belief. This the writer can achieve by using the materials of his culture like costuming for special effect as one can see in The Fronded Circle.

One sees in The Fronded Circle that the potency of Igbo traditional ritual is clearly shown through Dr. Gilbert Onwuatuebe who is a representative of the Igbo elite who are alienated from their tradition. The type of ritual involved in the play is explained by Okwu to Uka when Onwuatuebe fortifies himself against death. Okwu explains:

. .. A man buries his head as a protective charm against death. It is a powerful machine; it lets the man swop his age (sic) life with the lives of other men especially ... his kit and kin"(3).

Irobi explains the potent medicine using Nwannediya who gives account of the mysterious way of her son's drowning in the river and the disappearance of Onwuatuebe's four other sons. Okwu confirms Nwannediya' s account when he reports: “four of them disappear when their father is ill. Whenever he is on his sick bed they disappear. He calls them to his sick bed and later they disappear." (14) Nwannediya in agony of losing five sons is also at the verge of losing her daughter, Kelechi, who cannot be delivered of her baby unless Onwuatuebe finally dies. She is also in a narrow edge of losing another man Gilbert who calls her mother, Irobi brilliantly places Nwannediya to illustrate the potency of the "powerful medicine and Ownuatuebe's violation of cultural laws. Nwannediya declares:

Our people say ... when a man has made his will ... after a man has shared out his yams among his sons ... after a man has boasted about his life and has seen the end of his road … if death refuses to come, the man goes out in search of death ... but Onwuatuebe will not! (The drums, as if in sympathy , pound somberly) our people say ... when a vain and want on moon dances out late into arena of the sky, it shines its brightest before the twilight hour and then disappears just to rid her face of shame. But Onwutuebe has no shame. (The drums punctuate her painful singsong}. (15).

Onwudinulo, the medicine man (dibia) as having ulterior motif of inheriting Onwuatuebe's property, secretly unearths the pot of charms and releases the spirit of Onwuatebe's disintegrating body and tricks Gilbert to untimely death by making him dance to the Ese drum.

In The Fronded Circle, Irobi's protagonist reach the state of possession through masking, drumming and dancing; for example, Gilbert, when the Ese drumming reaches the climax, he is in a state of possession which makes him reveal Onwuatuebe's evil deeds by confessing "I tied up my head, I hid it in a pot and buried it in my yam barn. I sacrificed my five sons in exchange for my life." (72)

Gilbert is a representative of the African elite. He is married to a black American who holds a doctorate degree in musicology. His pride may be the cause of his tragic fate. Onwudinulo declares of him, "He is an outsider. He lived in America for twenty years. He knows no tradition and no customs. He understands no proverbs. He cannot interpret the message of the drums." (50) On Gilbert's state of trance as he dances to the Ese drumbeats, Onwudinulo speaks of him in proverbs:

When a man wanders away from his roots he becomes a ghost. The blind bat that flies into a witch's pot sealed its fate. The tortoise carries a world of wisdom in its shell yet it does not know how to climb a tree. Afonne Onwuatuebe, the crab may wade the mighty ocean but it ends up in the soup pot of a woman. (65)

From the foregoing therefore, Gilbert, by dancing to the Ese breaks the law that is associated with life and death. Gilbert becomes a tragic victim of the rituals he calls "primitive." (52) In as much as Irobi is using Igbo rituals to recreate, he at the same time examines the abuse of rituals by traditional priests like Onwudinulo who exploits his cultural materials available to him to wickedly lure Gilbert to death using the Ese dance. Again, one notices communal cleansing of guilt by Gilbert's and Onwutuebe's death which brought about the new baby boy of Kelechi as the stage pointer pinpoints "suddenly a baby's cry pierces the tragic air." (72)

Irobi, from this play, is of the conviction that ritual can function in the rebirth of the society. The presentation of rituals in Irobi's plays though in tragic and revolutionary forms authenticate the Igbo cosmology of human suffering and greatness without having to borrow from European culture contrary to the suggestion of scholars of evolutionist school who suggest that African playwrights should borrow from European rituals for authenticity. It is based on relevance and authenticity of ritual that one should examine Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman published in 1975.

Soyinka in Death and the King's Horseman is concerned with the tragic implications of retrogressive cultural practices for the individual and the society. It is the same cultural material that Ladipo uses in his play Oba Waja. The event reveals to us the death of Alafin of Oyo in 1946. There is this institutional Yoruba concept of forcing the horseman of the Alafin to commit suicide (yet willingly) once the king dies and this is the material for the play. The play demonstrates the violation of a traditional order and Wole Soyinka sees it as tragic for the society. Soyinka's Elesin Oba (the king's Horseman) refuses to play the function placed upon him by the Yoruba tradition. The culture is that as soon as the Oba dies, his horseman, the Elesin dies with him by committing what could be regarded as ritual suicide. In this particular incident of the king's death, the Elesin is reluctant to carry out his duty and his son, Olunde, who is trained overseas under the make belief that the community's code of conduct stands at risk by his father's refusal of playing his role acts on his father's stead. Soyinka is perturbed that the Yoruba society still practice and approve such inhuman culture may be unconsciously. He uses the play as a medium to illustrate that servitude is unconsciously practiced to a creditable degree especially as it causes the death of the future generation represented by Olunde who in illusion takes the inhuman action of killing himself thinking that he would through it maintain the status quo and resolve society's problem.

According to Nwahunnanya on "Tragedy in African Literary Drama":

Soyinka suggests that it is both tragic for any progressive society to still encourage such an obnoxious custom, and for an educated man like Olunde to accept to waste his potential, only to appease inconsequential forces in order to avert the imagined disruption of the harmony of the traditional cosmos. It is tragic for the society because despite it having educated people like Olunde, it still gropes in the dark, and allows itself to be led by people who insist that no progressive changes should be affected in the status. (226)

Kolawole Ogungbesan is of the view that Soyinka using Death and the

King's Horseman to access his view on traditional society is not kin on using traditional material to solve present societal problem. But one should note that Soyinka uses his ritual material to comment pictorially on the existing problems of society.

Diala recalls that Irobi participated in the acting of Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman and one could claim that Irobi got his powerful rhetoric of "meditating on drumbeats from the Fungi of a Trance." (13) Soyinka's craftiness in the use of drums is illustrated when he writes about Elesin getting close to the moment of sacrifice:

(They listen to the drums) They have begun to seek out the heart of the king's horse. Soon it will ride in its bolt of raffia with the dog at its feet. Together they will ride on the shoulders of the king's brooms through the pulse centers of the town. They know it is here I shall await them. (His eyes

appear to cloud). He passes his hand over them as if to clear his sight. He gives a faint smile (40- 41).

In conclusion, the relevance of drama in African ritual could be seen in the texture of the works of African playwrights. It cannot be debated that African ritual is used to create as portrayed in Irobi's The Other Side of the Mask (1999), The Fronded Circle (1999) and Soyinka's Death the King's Horseman (1975).

Myth, according to Afam Ebeogu mediates with literature in order to give the literature of a people a unique feature. Ebeogu asserts: Myth, thus in the hands of many African playwrights becomes a malleable weapon which is reconditioned to make the plays distinctively African. In other words, myth is a primary instrument of domestication in African literary drama. (12)

It is a fact that most of the African plays are usually written in foreign languages (namely English and French) with few exceptions as in Ladipo's Oba Koso and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Ngaahika Ndeenda_that are written in native languages. This language situation creates additional duty for the African playwright for he has to make the language he is using close to his African audience so as to get effective response from them. This, the playwright achieves by employing the speech cadences relative to the thought pattern of the African mind. This could explain why the African playwrights' ritualistic elements of language like songs, proverbs, transliteration, patois, proverbs, anecdotes, idioms etc are used.

For example Irobi's Nwokedi has Igbo songs which are in their raw forms. Ebeogu advises that directors need not feel bound to use raw native songs where they must not be used. One advantage of using native materials anyway is that it helps to preserve the culture of a people. In assessing the Dramatic Limits of Igbo Ritual", one observes that although there are the evolutionist and relativist schools of thought, the fact still is that for African drama to be authentically relevant and universal, the people's culture must be recreated so as to illuminate the people's consciousness. However, from the works of Soyinka and Irobi, one observes that African ritual is not a dead end rather it is being recreated as malleable weapon of societal change.

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