

‘Folkism’ and The Search for A Relevant Nigerian Literary Theatre: Sam Ukala’s The Placenta of Death and Akpakaland as Paradigms

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Abstract

The period 1940 to 2011 portrayed Nigeria’s literary theatre as being largely irrelevant to its audience, due to the compositional lapses of many English play texts and their stage productions. These loopholes mainly comprise inappropriate and alienating aesthetics of subject matter and language of the texts. Dating from the post-colonial era in 1960s, writers sought to correct these anomalies through decolonizing dramaturgical options and the employment of aesthetic elements that could relate to the African psychological, socio-cultural, political and historical realities. Unfortunately, a large percentage of these developments still ran short of fully authoritative and genuinely indigenous Nigerian performance idioms that would have accorded full relevance to the literary theatre. Currently, various theoretical propositions and alternative dramaturgical techniques have emerged as avenues for realizing full relevance, one of which is Sam Ukala’s theory and practice of ‘Folkism’. In this paper, Folkism is discussed with a view to demonstrating its potentials for ensuring the full relevance of Nigeria’s literary theatre.

Introduction

The term ‘relevance’ here connotes such ideas as importance, familiarity, relationship and suitability. A relevant Nigerian literary theatre is therefore conceived as a play text or its stage performance which portrays aesthetic and contextual features that can fully be identified with, and valued by Nigerian readers or theatre-goers. The theatre is expected to be centrally related to Nigeria, it must be useful and important in the contemporary socio-economic and political pursuits of Nigeria. The compositional elements of such a theatre must be familiar with Nigerians; above all, its aesthetic standards must be profound and literarily sublime enough to suit a nation of Nigeria’s Nobel and international status.

Furthermore, such a theatre may not be averse, to global appeal. It is a skillfully hybridized theatre mold, deriving from the syncretism of Nigeria’s indigenous theatre forms and the Western oriented dramatic conventions, in such a way that the Nigerian elements constitute the dominant and basic structural frame of the artistic combination. Ossie Eneke alludes to this global concept of a relevant Nigerian literary theatre, when he writes:

I do not object to foreign influences; after all, no culture can grow without them. But I deplore a cultural contact that leads to the destruction of our culture, thereby inducing in our people a sense of rootlessness. We need a modern theatre that has its roots in the Nigerian soil and can therefore absorb foreign elements without losing its own character. We must insist that the Nigerian culture be the medium within which synthesis of values occurs so that the indigenous culture does not become a mere shadow of the European culture. Nigerian dramatists must study the aesthetic habits of our own people so as to create a relevant and viable theatre (64).

On the negative polarity, an irrelevant Nigerian literary theatre refers to a play text or its stage production which is alluded to in the following views by Chinua Achebe and Sam Ukala. According to Achebe, “it is clear to me that an African writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from flames” (78). In his own writing, Ukala states:

It has been alleged by A. Bodurin, Oyin Ogunba, Bode Osayin and Biodun Jeyifo, among others, that the plays written in English, by Nigerian literary playwrights are usually unpopular with the Nigerian socio-economic problems. The unpopularity of the Nigerian literary plays has been attributed by these critics, mainly to language: (i) The language is foreign and

illiterate Nigerians do not understand it. (ii) It is deliberately made too 'difficult' for the average literate Nigerian to comprehend. The criticism that the plays are ineffective in helping to tackle Nigeria's socio-economic problems is expressed in three main ways: (i) subject matter does not reflect the recent history and current aspirations of Nigerians and is therefore, irrelevant; (ii) subject matter may be rooted in Nigeria's history and culture but it is often distorted beyond the recognition and appeal of the Nigerian masses, as a result of which the values are lost which the plays were intended to communicate; (iii) subject matter may be rooted in Nigeria's history and culture and may not even be distorted beyond recognition, but it may be presented in such a foreign or unfamiliar manner as the generality of Nigerians may not identify with (11).

The outlined, unpopular and alienating qualities of some irrelevant Nigerian literary plays may further be corroborated by a survey of the largely poor critical perception of many play texts and their stage productions. Referring to the colonial repertory in Nigeria (1940s to 1950s), Dapo Adelugba notes that the American and European texts that were performed ... in the 1950s were "stale, old English plays with poor dramatic content and without any bearing on the tastes of Nigerian audience, showing the students' little idea of their needs or their audiences" (qtd in Yerima 120). The plays in question include *The Bacchae* by Euripides, *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, *Othello* by Shakespeare. Owing to their lack of relevance, they were adapted to Nigerian aesthetic demands by Nigerian playwrights, though these adaptations were seen as poorly done.

The post-colonial theatre was associated with short-comings like historical imprecision – as exemplified by Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and *Kurunmi*. The former was re-written by Ahmed Yerima to achieve greater authenticity because critical response had disapproved the play. For instance:

.... Yes, when you read Ola Rotimi's *Oba Ovonramwen*, it does not represent what really happened. It was not written from the true perspective of the Binis or what really happened at the time. He did not place the monarch at the pedestal. It was written to suit the British people that came into Benin without any good intension (qtd in Yerima 73).

Kurunmi suffered the same disapproval since *Kurunmi*, the monarch of the play, is wrongly portrayed as a monogamist, rather than one with "a harem of wives" (Shaka 188).

Wole Soyinka's plays like *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Strong Breed* and others are considered "artistic failures because of their inability to convey meaning to the reader and by implication audience" (75). Although Soyinka's works are judged to be linguistically difficult and obscure, the playwright cannot outrightly be described as unable to convey meaning to all classes of Nigerians. Some Nigerians can draw meanings from the above plays of Soyinka. Hence, its irrelevance is attributable to its difficulty and abstractness in communication, not due to complete meaninglessness.

Writing on J.P. Clark, critics attribute the irrelevance of his plays like *Song of a Goat*, *The Raft* and *The Masquerade* to his concern for "Elizabethan blank verse", and what Emeka Nwabueze calls his failure "to create memorable or dignified characters in his plays" (200). While commenting on Soyinka and Clark, Eneke opines that,

Our major modern dramatists – notably Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark – have failed to create authentic Nigerian dramas Although Soyinka has introduced song, dance ... into his plays, his dramaturgy remains rooted in the English stage where he served his apprenticeship. His rhapsodic flights, usually festooned with abstract western ideas, are as incongruous as the syntax he often draws from Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas. Soyinka's plays are full of intellectual energy, but stultified by his inability to write clear and appropriate dialogue (63).

Numerous other critical disapprovals of plays since the Post-Independence drama period, through the revolutionary theatre of 1970s, to the recent time, abound but cannot be exhaustively discussed here. The foregoing examples can give an insight into the largely unpopular, alienating or irrelevant status of play texts in Nigeria within the period under study. As a remedial approach, however, an indigenous Nigerian dramatic theory, called 'Folkism', with its techniques, has been focused here, with a view to demonstrating how it can engender a fully relevant Nigerian theatre. Two Nigerian plays – *The Placenta of Death*, and *Akpakaland*, both by Sam Ukala – are used as paradigms in this exploration.

The Relevance of 'Folkism'

Folkism refers to "an indigenous dramatic aesthetic principle" which "may derive from the use in the African literary theatre of folk linguistic, structural and performance styles" (Ukala 38). Folkism manifests etymological and functional relationships with African folktale – "a short narrative in prose of unknown authorship which has been transmitted orally" or "stories invented by a known author" (Abrams 124). Ukala is right when he notes that the African folktale provides a structural framework or a mold for the creative vision of folkism. He points out that the folktale can easily be employed in composing literary drama because it shares a lot of features in common with a literary play. Both are narratives which can be realized in performance. They

are “temporal, mimetic, interpretative and synthetic”, both involve much speech, and to transform the folktale successfully, the Nigerian literary playwright should “study deeply the techniques of the African folktale” (Ukala 38).

Deriving from his deep study of the methodologies of the African folktale, and acknowledging the validity of the findings made by African scholars and researchers like J.P. Clark, Efua Sutherland, J.C. de Graft, and Dan Ben-Amos, Sam Ukala proposes the theory and practice of folkism. He further conceives this theory, with its practical dimensions, as an aesthetic principle which may provide remedies for deficiencies of African literary theatre (11), through its quality of “clear communication and popularity among the folk” (qtd in Akpuda 40), its use of relevant subject matter that reflects the recent history, aspirations, and culture of Nigerians without distorting them beyond recognition.

In his article, “Politics of Aesthetics”, Ukala represents what he refers to as ‘the laws of aesthetic response’ which constitute the essence of folkism. According to him,

The laws are eight in number: The Law of Opening; the Law of Joint Performance; the Law of Creativity, Free Enactment and Responsibility; the Law of Judgment; the Law of Protest against Suspense; the Law of Expression of the Emotions; the Law of Ego Projection; and the Law of Closing (33).

A creative observation of these laws in playwriting culminates in Nigerian play texts that can be read and staged as models for the relevant theatre being searched for. Law I – the law of Opening – underscores the opening techniques of traditional folktale performance. These include the narrator’s arousal of the audience, his introduction of the play’s major characters and its settings. The arousal is achieved through ‘a call’ made by the narrator, to which the audience responds, or a song in which they join. The audience may, at times, join in a dance with the narrator.

Law 2 – the Law of Joint Performance – exploits the participatory nature of the audience in indigenous folktale performance. Here, “the traditional African audience co-performs” with the narrator, “asking questions or making comments to remove vagueness, playing roles in the enactment of parts of the story and taking over the tale from a failing narrator” (34). A playwright should embody in his composition, some artistic devices that may in performance unobtrusively draw the audience physically or verbally into some parts of the action. Laws 1 and 2 reflect the joint responses of the narrator and the audience to a performance situation (Ukala 36).

Law 3 – The Law of Creativity, Free Enactment and Responsibility. In the play text, which is also the initial raw material for staging, the playwright demonstrates his dexterity in crafting dramatic language; he exhibits his skill in using folktale structural frame and domesticated English language, to interpret socio-political and economic conditions of contemporary society. Under law 3, the text manifests the art of the narrator as a free actor who can take up any role in the play when necessary and later revert to his part as the story teller. The playwright is underlined here as a creative artist, dramaturgically showcasing in his script, a folktale performance in which the story teller (the narrator) fleshes out the tale with diverse aesthetic devices, thereby providing a relevant material for Nigerian stage. In the words of Ukala, the law of creativity is observed when “the traditional African narrator fleshes out the memorized bone-structure of the tale in dramatic language-pleasant to speak and to hear, easy to understand and yet rich in texture. He adapts new experience to the tale to replace obsolete parts, enhance contemporary relevance or provide new interpretation ... (36).

The third tier of law 3 – Responsibility – may be observed in a play text in which the playwright assumes responsibility for his work. This may be achieved by his use of a folktale which he creates out of his artistic initiative and vision.

Laws 4, 5, 6 and 7 concern the audience’s evaluation of the narrator’s abilities and the character’s conduct; the audience’s questions and comments; their free expression of emotions of grief, pleasure, scorn, fear and sympathy; and their “idiosyncratic interjections aimed at attracting attention to themselves as potential narrators” respectively (Ukala 38). These laws are reflected in the text for the reading audience and for stage viewers.

Law 8 – the last law of folkism known as The Law of Closing, demands for a reflection in the script or the stage performance, of the traditional folktale technique of bringing a story to an end. This involves a closing remark rendered by the narrator. The foregoing elaboration of the laws, as they can be observed in the play text or its stage production are further clarified and exemplified below by two plays which are here analyzed as scripts written in the mold of folkism.

The Placenta of Death

The play dramatizes the socio-political conflict between the oppressors and the oppressed in the society. It portrays the triumph of the oppressed poor masses, through the support of influential allies, over the leadership of the wealthy and powerful oppressors. The play therefore smacks of an African brand Marxism by recommending the class-consciousness of the masses, and raising this awareness to a level that inspires a collective struggle against oppression.

Set in Owodoland, the *Placenta* unfolds its story using the structural frame of traditional African folktale performance. The oppressive leadership is represented by Owodo III, Oba of Owodoland; Emeni and his daughter, Ibo who is the Oba's first wife. Emeni is a wealthy slave, who, by virtue of his daughter's marriage to the Oba, is placed on a pedestal with the royal household, the leadership, and the oppressors.

The oppressed comprise the slaves, and the free-borns, most of who are poor, including the Oba's second wife – Omon – and her family. The Oba's first wife – Ibo – has a wealthy father – Emeni – hence she doesn't belong to the poor class. When Emeni and her daughter nurse the vision of swinging the hands of history to their favour, by planning to turn Owodo III and the free borns of the land into slaves, the non-slaves at the corridor of power, such as the Oba, Iyasere and Ihama vehemently discourage them.

Through the intimidation and oppression of the poor, Emeni and his daughter – Ibo – succeed in manipulating Oba Owodo into the disaffection of Omon's family. Emeni and Ibo achieve this by changing Oba's gifts meant for Omon when she is delivered of Oba's son, to the meat of a vulture. Disappointed, Omon picks the smoked placenta of the vulture, which at the appropriate time, she secretly puts into the Oba's soup and he eats it. This placenta is also eaten by some slaves who came to work in the Oba's farm, consequently, this makes Oba and the farmers vomit, while one of the farmers die.

Discovering this problem of placenta in the soup, and the concomitant vomiting, Oba Owodo summons his subjects to enable him detect the person who put it in the soup. Omon owns up to the crime and when the Oba appears to tilt towards punishing her and her allies, Iyasere opposes him. In the battle that ensues, the Oba and his slave allies are killed by Omon's supporters and the sympathizers of the poor masses. Owing to the earlier developed social-consciousness among the down-trodden in Owodoland, the oppressed slaves plead and declare their oneness with the victorious poor, thereby portraying the imminent emancipation of the oppressed.

In *Placenta of Death*, the first law is effectively observed. The narrator makes the opening call to which the audience responds at the beginning of the story:

NAR.: (From Audience) Tohio!

AUD.: Ya ya, Ya ya, kpo!

NAR.: (Rising) Tohio!

AUD.: Ya ya, Ya ya, kpo!

Immediately following this call, is the opening song which is raised by members of the public audience at the request of the narrator who also proceeds to introduce the setting of the story, its subject matter and the major characters of the play. For example,

NAR.: So raise a song But raise a song of the times

(.... The song is sung as many times as it takes to touch the souls).

Hmm! That was more like it. Like a dirge for a nation shredded by riches and strife, such as Owodoland, the setting of tonight's story. That nation was rich. And riches begat power and injustice, enjoyment and anguish. Riches became a high fence between brother and brother Such was the situation when it was proposed that Owodo, the third, marry Ibo Owodoland didn't like the proposal (p 13).

The major characters of the play are also shown in action after the above brief exposition, as follows:

(Lights on Owodo's court. In consultation are Owodo III, IYASERE, IHAMA, and OLOTU in army uniform)

Other characters who were made obvious in their action at this early stage are: M.O.A member(s) of the audience and Ibo (p14-16).

This early introduction, not only transports the audience's imagination to the temporal dimension of folktale performance as mainly a night's affair in traditional African settings, but also gives a vivid suggestion that the play is going to be full of discord. The second law of folkism is also observed in the text. Even while reading the play, the reader feels the urge to join the audience in their responses to the events. For instance, members of the public audience respond freely to the narrator's opening call, they join in the opening song. The M.O.A, as well as members of the public audience constantly comment on the action, throw questions to the actors or the narrator and even make moves into the main stream of the play, thereby contributing to the progress of the action. Examples, the narrator informs the audience:

NAR.: And so Osaze and Iziegbe went to show the Oba their daughter's.

The audience completes the sentence with the word "Belly" (25). Also, when Ebuzun – one of the slaves serving in the Oba's palace – throws the following question to the audience:

EBUZUN: (To Audience) Will a man, a real man place his scrotum in a platter and watch another man deball him? The audience responds, "No!" (p 28).

Furthermore, in response to the narrator's story of how Ibo uttered sarcastic statements to spite the Oba's second wife – Omon – the M.O.A (member(s) of the audience) question him:

M.O.A.: How did Omon take all that? (p 33)

Obviously, Ukala's creation of the role of M.O.A, is an artistic endeavour to ensure that the play obeys the law of joint performance, even when the public audience is not inspired to respond to the events. Because the audience starts from the opening call, to respond to the narrator, and join in the song, the play – *Placenta* Corroborates the suggestion that laws 1 and 2 are products of the joint responses of the narrator and the audience to a performance situation" (Ukala 36).

The third law is also complied with in the play. The playwright creates the folktale, which he employs in articulating the story of a contemporary sociopolitical conflict. The crisis builds up from a number of issues that bug the present societies in the developing world, especially Nigeria. These issues range from social-consciousness, disparity between the poor and the rich, oppression of the poor by the rich or callous leadership.

The play is rich in domesticated and dramatic language that is well garnished with artistic imagery, indigenous Nigerian speech idioms, idiophones, ironies and personifications. Examples: when Osaze identifies the kind of meat sent to his daughter Omon by the Oba, after the birth of her son, she laments: "Eeu! My world-e! Is it a vulture? (p 48). Another effective domestication of English language, for effective communication to Nigerian readers and viewers, is obvious in the following lines:

Ebuzun: Here I come Let's see. (Opens the pot and closes it immediately). Hmm! Inside it something is flashing *mamama* like lightning. The Oba says it's all yours. That's the extent to which it is in my mouth-o (58-59).

The speech, not only embodies traditional Nigerian idiophones, but also employs simile, and vernacular-English adaptations.

In respect of 'free-enactment', instances abound: when Olotu ___ the war general and executioner ___ reacts to the booing of the audience against him for carrying a carton of money given to him by Emeni, the narrator engages in 'free-enactment: "(Enter Olotu, bearing his carton. Some M.O.A boo at him)".

OLOTU: (To NARRATOR). What's the matter with them?
Did I steal the money?

NAR: No

M.O.A. I: But how did you deserve it? Did you dance?

OLOTU: Well, he asked me to help him carry the carton of

....

M.O.A II: Are you normally his houseboy?

OLOTU: Don't insult me or I'll show you that I am a minister of Owodoland

NAR: And minister for war, for the master (p 33)

To observe the law of responsibility in the practice of folkism, Ukala in his play – *Placenta* ... demonstrates his ability to create a new tale in which he conscientizes the poor masses on the need to unite and present a collective force against oppressive economic and political subjugation. Although the play suggests Marxism, there can be no absolute ascription of the Marxist ideology or dramaturgy to the play. Hence, the playwright takes full responsibility and credit for his work.

As regards the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh laws, the play most apparently manifests the influence of laws 5 and 6. These are exemplified by questions and comments from the public audience and the M.O.A, such as:

M.O.A: One who is standing on the edge of the world and does not feel safe there, shouldn't he push his way to a safer place? (p45).

AUD: He should! (p45).

When Ebuzun denies putting the placenta in the soup given to Oba Owodo and the farmers, the M.O.A asks questions:

EBUZUN: (after scrutinizing it) My Lord, we didn't put such a thing in the soup (p62)

M.O.A: Who put it then? (p63)

Law 6 is obvious in the play: in a scornful remark against Osaze who cares less about his inability to provide good feeding for his family, members of the audience respond as follows:

M.O.A.: This man has no shame! (45) Also, when Oba Owodo makes his second wife – Omon – swear an oath to prove her innocence of adultery and a plan to poison her co-wife, the M.O.A remarks: "Oh! That was wicked" (53)

The play also embodies the features of law 8 in the narrator's closing remark at the end of the play. Here he says: "Yes, Osaze, the slave and the poor are one" (74).

Akpakaland

Sam Ukala's play, *Akpakaland*, like *The Placenta of Death* is also deeply rooted in folkism. The play dramatizes, yet another sociopolitical conflict where a resolute intimidation of the poor by the rich, coupled with a deliberate intrigue to ruin the fortune of the poor, becomes a boomerang to destroy the oppressive class. This wealthy class is represented by the president of Akpakaland – President Akpaka – and his wives – Fulama,

Yeie, Seotu – who are from wealthy backgrounds; Unata and Iyebi from poor roots, who represent the oppressed. Having secretly bewitched Unata into developing a mysterious tail, Fulama, the president's head wife, sets the ball rolling, with intent to expose her, ridicule her and rob her of the president's affection. Through the aid of Unata's father, Idemudia, who takes her to Enwe – a medicine man – the tail is transferred back to Fulama, thus, returning to her, all that she planned for Unata.

Following the earlier suggestion that the president's wives be examined publicly to expose any of them with a tail – as reported to the president by Fulama – and due to the president's reluctance to punish Fulama when her tail is finally exposed – just because she belongs to the 'province of the rich' – crisis erupts. Eventually, the consciousness of the poor is provoked and this makes them defy the monarch's unjust sympathy for Fulama. The struggle that crops up leads to the death of Fulama and some other people, followed by the capitulation to the arms of justice by the representatives of injustice, oppression and wickedness, such as:

Ogunpa, Iya Fulama, Umal, Seotu, Yeie, Guards, and finally president Akpaka. Each kneels and hands up (Ukala 57).

In this play, the laws of aesthetic response are observed. Under the first law, the spatial setting of the play is introduced in the beginning as: a living room in state house, a traditional doctor's home. There is an opening song which the narrator leads the audience in

Lu n'ilu Tell a tale
Ilu Nwokoro Tale about Nwokoro
Do n'udo Tug at the rope
Udo kpiri-kpiri Rope kpiri-kpiri (p10)

The narrator and some members of the audience dance. Both song and dance help to warm the auditorium, and arouse the audience. The characters are also introduced in this 'opening' as,

Akpaka in Agbada Two Guards There were his wives: FULAMA, YEIYE, SEOTU, UNATA and IYEBI (10)

The announcement that one of Akpaka's wives has a tail, sets the mood and provides exposition to the subject matter of the story. The audience realizes from the onset that they are watching the unfolding of a mystery.

The second law is obvious in the following lines:

M.O.A.: A tail? (p11)

When Akpaka demands from Fulama as follows: "Now, Fulama, what were you telling me"? (p13), the M.O.A interjects: "Good! Let her say it to the hearing of all (p13).

Also, after Fulama has eaten the roasted plantain and begins to scratch herself, the narrator appears and speaks with the audience:

NAR: (reappearing) the wind will blow
AUD: And we'll see the arse of the hen!
NAR: This is not an open, physical conflict (p40)

The evidences of laws 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 are also obvious in Akpakaland: The use of traditional praise names, idiophones and divination rituals (law 3); comments from the members of the audience (law 5), and others. Law 8 is also observed with the narrator's closing remarks:

NAR: From here I went, from here I returned o!
AUD: Welcome o
NAR: (with a bow) E e!

The aesthetic and sociological components of *Placenta ...* and *Akpakaland*, qualify them as examples of fully relevant Nigerian literary theatre. They draw a sharp picture of Nigeria's socioeconomic problems in this contemporary age. In doing so, they identify class discrimination which indicates the serious oppression meted out to the less privileged by the privileged group.

Although the wealthy, royal class pretends to attend to the needs of the masses, the group really neglects them and sympathizes more with its fellow wealthy citizens. These common qualities of the plays are capable of popularizing them to Nigerians and Africans generally because they see their social conditions portrayed in the play.

Aesthetically, the domesticated language of the plays, use of traditional speech elements such as idiophones, proverbs, ironies, personification and other imageries that are common in Nigerian expressions make them relevant. The African folktale tradition, and its major credits of audience participation and speech interlocations, are well articulated in the plays, thereby drawing them closer and making them clearer to both the highly and the averagely intellectual.

Having established its relevance on the national ground, the plays also possess intercultural strength that can send them round the globe. The oneness of folktale and the literary drama, which is aesthetically obvious, especially in the use of English language, dialogue, artistic devices, and in its resemblance of the epic theatre, can justify the folkist plays as approved literary works for global consumption.

Conclusion

'Folkism' as an alternative aesthetic device for creating a popular and relevant Nigerian literary theatre has been vindicated here through the plays discussed. It has been demonstrated here that the earlier attempts by Nigerian playwrights went a long way to create a literary theatre which embodied important elements of indigenous Nigerian theatre. But owing to aesthetic and other compositional lapses, the literary theatre continued to lack adequate potentials to validate it as fully relevant. It is therefore recommended here that folkism be embraced as one of the latest and most far reaching techniques for ensuring a fully relevant Nigerian literary theatre.

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